

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY

**OU\_166457**

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY

# I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

BY

IVOR BROWN



HAMISH HAMILTON

90 GREAT RUSSELL STREET LONDON

<i>First Published</i>	-	-	-	-	<i>January 1934</i>
<i>Second Impression</i>	-	-	-	-	<i>February 1934</i>
<i>Third Impression</i>	-	-	-	-	<i>February 1934</i>
<i>Fourth Impression</i>	-	-	-	-	<i>June 1934</i>
<i>Fifth Impression</i>	-	-	-	-	<i>February 1935</i>

PRINTED IN GUERNSEY, C.I., BRITISH ISLES,  
BY THE STAR AND GAZETTE COMPANY LTD.

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THE FEAST OF UNREASON - -	7
II	SEX IN OUR TIME - - -	26
III	CUPID AND PSYCHE - - -	41
IV	ROMANTIC NOTIONS - - -	59
V	BROTHER LAWRENCE - - -	78
VI	BELLY AND BRAIN - - -	95
VII	CALIBAN - <del>11. 11.</del> - - -	110
VIII	NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD - -	136
IX	MYTHS AND MAGIC - - -	168
X	THE SONGSTERS - - -	196
XI	THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE -	225





# I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

## CHAPTER I

### THE FEAST OF UNREASON

**A** RSON is one of the oldest forms of æsthetic criticism and is still a favourite exercise; Berlin rekindles the fires of Rome. The Nazis, who appear to have some sense of ceremonial, have invented a ritual of book-burning. University towns are chosen, with a nice irony, as the site of these performances; midnight is the hour of incineration. A bonfire is assembled, the purifying flame begins to rise, and a crier proclaims and expounds the sentence as the literary fuel is flung to the furnace of Teutonic Liberation.

Crier; 'Against class-war and materialism. For community of the people and idealism. I commit the works of Marx and Kautsky to the flames.' So passes, in spark and smoke, the massive timber

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

of *Das Kapital*. Again, the Crier speaks. 'Against soul-destroying over-valuation of subconscious life. For the nobility of the human soul, I commit the works of Freud to the flames.' So to the pyre goes that tiresome monarch of the modern mind, Œdipus Complex. There is more stoking, more fuel is hurried to the incinerator's hand. Crier, 'Against presumptuous bungling with the German language. For the protection of our people's most priceless property. I commit to the flames . . .' Read English for German and what you would yourself commit upon these terms may be a very large matter. The joy of destruction is not yet dead in us; we gladly pay our coppers at the showman's stall where we are encouraged to bombard all the cups and saucers, so inviting and so elusive.

It need hardly be said that I do not believe in bonfires as the best means of dispatch for intellectual nuisances. I am old-fashioned enough to believe in freedom; I do not want to put on a coloured shirt and dance upon 'the stinking corpse of liberty'. If arson there must be, let us burn such natural fuel as the fasces and the shafts of axes and leave the books upon the shelf. My title is a gesture, my invocation to let the fire-gangs

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

commence is metaphorical. The flames to which I commit the enemy are those of argument, reinforced, I hope, by a little salutary rudeness and by a spark or two of insolent contempt. These are the only flames which can finally consume. The crier may shout his loudest, the stoker may set the indubitably Aryan flames roaring about the print and paper so deplorably misused by Jews and Democrats. Rely on cookery as a short way with Socialism and Psycho-analysis, and Marx will prove a salamander yet, Kautsky will develop asbestos qualities, and Freud will emerge Phœnix-like, from these punitive ashes. Roasting the villain solves no problems, as persecution should have discovered after its first experiments with the stake and the tinder-box. A platitude? A thousand times yes, but a million times forgotten. The Irish Free State, young child of liberty, is busily engaged on averting the opinions of Aldous Huxley from the pious homes of gunmen. Burn or ban, the process is eternally popular and eternally futile.

But committing to the flames of contrary argument is a job that has to be done, a task, at the moment, insufficiently attempted. That the modern code of manners has abolished invective

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

and abuse from the armoury of criticism, may be no great harm, though sweetness and light are qualities which do not always or easily emerge as readable. But what is wrong with us to-day is a tame surrender to the last-minute reputations. Mr. T. S. Eliot offers the public the balderdash of his *Waste-land* (pretentious bungling with the English language?) and immediately becomes a pundit, bestriding the Atlantic with his cultural messages and sending criticism scuttling to its holes, terrified to ask the Master's own question.

'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish?'

Poor D. H. Lawrence, who wandered round the world getting more and more fussed about sex, did meet with the idiotic criticism of the English police, but he rattled the intellectuals into accepting his petty flight from intelligence as reason's masterpiece. When he discovered the seat of human wisdom in the bellies of the Mexican Indians (of which more anon), the highest brow was lowered in adoration of philosophy so daring and profound. Epstein deserted his own genius for graven portraiture in order to cover London with chunks

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

of Mumbo-Jumbo, evidently agreeing with Lawrence that art stopped short in the uncultivated court of the Emperor M'Bang M'Bwa. It is true that the Philistine has sense enough to scoff and there may be some audacious English school-ma'ams who still refuse to accept as a final flower of English poesy Mr. Eliot's epochal announcement *re* Mr. Prufock.

'I grow old . . . I grow old . . .  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.  
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the  
beach.'

Perhaps, too, there are some Forsytish fogeys, bourgeois slaves of the classical curriculum, who, like myself, can hardly swallow as the final word in lyric art this pulse from the Lawrentian bloodstream.

'All that we have while we live, is life;  
And, if you don't live during your life, you are a piece  
of dung.'

How profound the Vitalist Philosophy, how subtle the expression in its choice of metaphor! Many little boys at school must have written

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

rhymes of similar quality on scraps of paper while a bored master was intoning about the glories of 'Eng. Lit.'. But they did not seek to publish them, partly because they knew what they were worth. Yet our immunity from such poetry continually weakens; it has now been discovered that half-baked intellectuals will worship baby-talk and even persuade other people to pay for it. Moreover I doubt whether the much-despised leaders of Edwardian intellect would have tumbled upon bended knees and raised a cry of 'Genius' if confronted with such daring thought, such brilliant phrasing as occurs in this Lawrentian gem.

'Good husbands make unhappy wives;  
so do bad husbands, just as often;  
but the unhappiness of a wife with a good husband  
is much more devastating  
than the unhappiness of a wife with a bad husband.'

They might even have committed such footling to the flames. The fact that Eliot's *Waste-land* and Lawrence's *Pansies* are still taken seriously by the young is proof positive of one thing – that the War-babies have just learned to read and have failed to grow up. For an audience of this kind

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

anything will do, provided it is rude and rudimentary. For the author to be unintelligible is something of an advantage, since those who cannot understand plain sense prefer to be in an atmosphere where nothing whatever can be understood. Gibberish levels all minds, as negroid cacophonies level all ears. Hence the popularity of much modern verse. Here the fool seems as knowing as his betters and anybody who has made hay with a lexicon can pass for a minstrel. In Mr. Humbert Wolfe's 'Reverie of Policeman' there is an appeal to the Muse Cacophone which perfectly summarises the fashionable poetry.

'Aid them who take a handful in a hurry  
of wholly unrelated words from Murray,  
and spill them in gorilla Esperanto  
on verse's tomb in reason's Campo Santo.  
Be with them, loathsome strumpet, when they curb  
the native insolence of noun and verb,  
seeking that happiest of all conditions  
when verse is one long string of prepositions,  
until the latest of poetry's go-getters,  
breaking up words into constituent letters,  
produces poems, composed of shred and splinter  
that read like blurred instructions to the printer.'

The rebuke in no way exaggerates the offence.

But the poets, after all, are a mere excrescence



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

on the general nuisance of contemporary nonsense. They are representative, in their little way, because they typify the rejection of a civilised tradition. If the fathers sang, the children must squawk and squeal. How else can the poor dears show their independence? But the purpose of this book is not to cull the pansies of the Lawrentian genius or to wander in waste-lands seeking for sense where sense is self-consciously thrown aside. My object is to relate all the follies of the day to their common origin. The committers of folly, the authors of the rubbish which I commit to my symbolical flames, have not, in all probability, the wit to understand any general principles of puerility. It needs reason to understand that the source of the trouble is a general flight from reason and from the legacy of civilised opinion in which past reason has been embodied. The world increasingly substitutes fisticuffs for argument, flags and symbols for facts and realities, belief in the omnipotence of the sub-conscious for faith in self-determination of the will by reason guided. It grovels before negro art; it teaches its children that impulse is divine. Consequently it has no standards, as it certainly has no security.

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

There was some excuse for the retreat from reason, at least from a valuation of reason ruling among those who remained; in their academic alcoves, stupidly unaware that the new democracy of mass-formation was dangerously different from their curriculum ideal, the democracy of city-states. Those who dominated higher education before the War, Liberal Idealists – the Liberalism not to be taken in a party sense – did too strongly exhort the young to believe in the possibilities of continuous political evolution by rational persuasion. They were encouraged to imagine that the optimistic principles of Athenian democracy, as described by Pericles in an effort to sustain the war-spirit against Sparta, were easily applicable to the huge populations of to-day and, when Graham Wallas, who knew the practice as well as the principle of politics, pointed out in his *Human Nature in Politics* that the social garden was by no means so lovely or so easily trimmed, the shock was salutary. Young men proceeding from the schools to the constituencies had some sharp lessons in the nature of democracy. It was necessary to put academic notions out of mind. But the post-war surrender to unreason turned out to be as

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

excessive as it was craven. It was once believed that the counting of heads was preferable to breaking them. The further conclusion that, if we counted often enough and long enough, the sum would 'come right', was undoubtedly too sanguine. But that was no cause for the abandonment of counting all together. The flight from reason has been a scamper to the hooligans' heaven. Democracy, faced with gigantic problems not of its own making, left its supporters disillusioned, and there was an easy opening for the wielders of the club and slaves of the slogan. So politics were reduced to a furious rivalry in gents' fancy shirtings, a haberdashers' carnival with gun-fire as the incidental music. It was once believed that, if voters did not think deeply, representatives might think for them. Now the idea is that nobody should do more brainwork than is necessary for the purchase of a party-coloured shirt.

That is one side of it. Another is the disintegration of the will, which is reason in action, by a mass of arbitrary assumptions about the subconscious self. Psycho-analysis may begin with common sense but it ends in a welter of black and beastly magic, perfectly attuned to the swamp-

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

and-jungle values of contemporary art and the knobkerry technique of contemporary politics. It has been obvious to everybody who ever thought for a moment that the repressions imposed by conscience may have unfortunate results and cause unforeseen explosions. The common sense of psycho-analytical doctrine can be discovered as easily in Shakespeare or Blake as in the works of any modern professor, with this advantage that it is decently written and free of nonsensical additions.

'Thou rascal beadle, hold they bloody hand  
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;  
Thou hotly lusts't to use her in that kind  
For which thou whips't her.'

If some Teutonic hand had written *King Lear* in the jargon of his school, all the highbrows would be squealing over its psychological truth and profound originality. Blake's *Proverbs of Hell* ('He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence') has condensed into three pages of superb epigram what the New Psychology takes a dozen volumes to spoil by ridiculous overstatement. But there is one of Blake's apothegms which, I fear, will not do; namely 'If a fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise.' That is exactly what the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

psycho-analysts, persisting, have not become. They have gone forward in their folly until they are incapable of seeing anything but their own theories. Their customers are here partly to blame; those who pay large sums of money to have their inhibitions revealed can rely on the tradesmen to produce the goods. Having assimilated Blake's notion that there is poison in the standing water, the psycho-analysts are so excited by the idea that they can see nothing but poison anywhere. When two people meet face to face in the street, they frequently both step the same way so that they are face to face again. Perhaps they both side-step once more with the same result. This perfectly natural accident is attributed by Freud to the primitive urge to commit rape and a man who can put that interpretation on a simple muscular reaction seems to me to have been driven insane. A doctor recently related the case of a man who, suffering from eczema, had consulted a psycho-analyst. He was solemnly informed that his malady was due to repressed homosexuality and that his cure lay in abstaining from women and in adopting the practices commonly called unnatural. The Nazi attack upon such preposterous nonsense is

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

surely not altogether barbarous. 'Soul-destroying, over-valuation of subconscious life' is a justified accusation.

The theory that our diseases are caused by mental or psychological states may sometimes have validity. Nervousness obviously has physical reactions. But to proceed from this to the assumption that both health and conduct are the slave of psychological accidents is to deny altogether the powers of reason and will. When that denial is made, all standards of behaviour vanish and we are all in the hands of the new witch-doctors who would never dream of telling the sluggard or the waster to pull himself together and make an effort. They would not admit that he could, by will-power, do himself any good whatever. They would have to cure him by some ridiculous incitement to excess in other directions.

Educational theory has naturally been annexed by the opponents of reason and will. One of our modernists has recently announced that the first purpose of education is to keep children from thinking and any discipline which stimulates the will is regarded as a stupid brutality. Naturally, with these foundations of theory, education

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

becomes a paradise for wander-witted people who dart from one book of Teutonic psychology to the next and experiment on the children according to the latest imaginings of Zurich or Vienna. Of course I do not say that traditional standards of knowledge and behaviour are necessarily sound; I suffered quite enough from the receipt of 'a first-class education' and subjection to the 'grand, old, fortifying curriculum' to make me an educational reformer. But reform is not going to be assisted by the absurd assumption that all inherited canons of thought and conduct are necessarily foolish and even vile. 'Go and see what the boy is doing and tell him not to,' is an idiocy not improved by standing it on its head so that it reads, 'Go and see what the boy is doing and tell him to carry on.' Furthermore, there is now a ludicrous habit of discovering abnormality everywhere, accompanied by the notion that the way to cure abnormality is to encourage its outlet in new directions. Children are regarded as bundles of 'complexes' and teachers, who ought to be teaching, devote themselves to 'analysis', which means pestering the children to describe their dreams and then putting fantastic and filthy interpretations on

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

them. The appetite for such discovery about the infant psyche grows with what it feeds on; the school becomes a kind of asylum in which the self-appointed doctors seem themselves to be most worthy of certification.

Meanwhile the dogmatism about the divinity of impulse continues without any reflection on what a surrender to instinctive anarchy would bring about. Mr. Aldous Huxley will hardly be regarded as a devoted inhabitant of reaction's last ditches, but I note that he has himself questioned the present disdain for discipline. He has observed that the remarkable toughness of the bourgeoisie in the highly organised countries of the West has enabled that class to stand up to tremendous social and economic shocks and that this toughness owes much to the schools. 'Relaxation of this discipline may lead to a softening of the bourgeois fibre and so to a downfall of the class and perhaps to a general instability of society.' Well, I am no devotee of what is politely called 'the hardening process'. Licking into shape may easily lick into deformity. We need reasonableness in these matters and Mr. Huxley's moderate counsel is opportune. But more of that in due course.



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

Meanwhile the New Barbarian delights to portray us all as the irrational victims of psychological 'forces. Self-control is regarded as a warping influence. We are not to direct our lives by reason, because reason is a liar, continually making sham excuses; we may not determine, since the notion of self-direction by volition is simply a form of self-deception; *libido* is the governing fact. With such postulates, persuasion is banished from politics, responsibility from conduct, and reason from the arts. We need not accept in its fullness Hamlet's lovely rant about man, noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in form and moving express and admirable, in action angelic, in apprehension god-like, the beauty of the world, and paragon of animals. But, if modesty forbids agreement with so rare a praise, self-respect should forbid consent to the hideous depreciation of the New Barbarism, which regards men and women as the serfs of instinct, rudderless vessels on the sea of desire, mere cattle driven hither and thither by the gad-fly of sex. Why should all acquired knowledge, all human experience, all civilisation be cast aside? It needs sifting, that is admitted; but why scrap it? The passion for such root-and-branch abolition

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

invades the arts as well as the schools. Our new poets angrily announce that everything written more than twenty years ago is dead stuff, its language a winding-sheet. Therefore we must have only new modes, new metres, new diction. But they do not prove that all old poetry is dead poetry; the proof of that, after all, is the response of the readers. Nothing is dead which makes men feel alive. They merely announce the death and trample on the supposed corpse, which occasionally surprises them by standing up for itself, as Professor A. E. Housman did when he delivered the 1933 Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge, choosing to speak on 'The Name and Nature of Poetry'. He actually did this without awaiting the by-your-leave of Mr. T. S. Eliot or asking permission of the new cacophonists, for which impertinence he was very sharply scolded in certain places. But Housman, I suppose, is an impossible fogey; he was writing poetry in the 'nineties; that settles any claims of his. He was pre-Drinkwater and poor Mr. Drinkwater is now the most popular subject for offensive epitaphs. So Housman must be a corpse twice over.

We must go to the jungle and be wise, publicly

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

brooding over our private parts until, like that mighty organ-voice of the New England, the author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, we can see almost nothing else. Whatever is dark is fair. Could anything have been more typical of the contemporary mind than the fuss made over an African chief who had ordered the flogging of 'a poor white'. I do not enter into the politics of the business or seek to defend the howitzer-parade of the dashing English Admiral. What is interesting is the attitude of the chief's English champions. These were exactly the people who are continually denouncing flogging as a revolting form of punishment. If a white man is flogged by a white man in an English gaol, they scream against barbarism; no doubt rightly, but let that pass. If a white chief had ordered the flogging of a 'poor black', they would have yelled themselves hoarse with indignation at the use of the lash. But, when a white man is flogged by blacks, they entirely forget that flogging is a horrible and degrading exercise and cry up the chief as though he were a new species of enlightened reformer. During all the outcry about the treatment of Tshekedi by England, there was no admission that the chief

## THE FEAST OF UNREASON

had employed a barbarous form of punishment. The negro is always right. So we must bow down to the gross images of Mumbo-Jumbo sculpture, writhe in rapture as perspiring blacks assail us with their Mumbo-Jumbo music, and discover the seat of wisdom in the bellies of contorting savages; when we have so abased ourselves, we must revere as great poetry the hiccoughs and grunts of the mentally dyspeptic young men who have been peering into Bloomsbury basements and have seen some underclothes drying by the fire.

Let fire be the last word. They ask for it.

## CHAPTER II

### SEX IN OUR TIME

IT is surely impossible to deny that the civilisation of our period is sex-frantic. It may be retorted that the world has always been sex-frantic; we are no worse than our fathers; in any case sex-frenzy is the condition of the world's continuation. Primitive religion brandishes the phallus or finds magic in the suggestive conformation of a cowrie-shell. The sophisticated city makes less honest answer with a leg-show, a beauty contest, or a film of jungle love. If you take more than a cursory glance at primitive religion, you will find that it is very much more concerned with eternal life than with the present one. It gaily salutes the forces of fertility; it far more seriously pursues the power that will save the soul from extinction and preserve the spirit of the tribal king to be for ever the guardian of the

## SEX IN OUR TIME

people. It is worth noticing that the sex-festivities of primitive religion were seasonal; there were times for a devotional licence. There were special feasts for celebration of the phallus; when the emotional release was achieved, the mind was free for other matters. But with us the cult has no limit, no cease. The local kinema is not so honest as to display a sexual symbol as its badge of office or so modest as to limit itself to a Sex Week or Phallic Fortnight. But from January 1st to December 31st it is screaming sex, selling sex, and flashing sex in fiery letters to the urban night in a way that would probably seem astonishing and revolting to a cannibal king. 'Love,' Mr. Shaw has observed, 'did nothing but prove the soundness of La Rochefoucauld's saying that very few people would fall in love if they had never read about it.' No doubt, but modern fiction, modern theatre, modern kinema so rarely give them anything else to read about or to look upon. Interpret love broadly enough and was there ever a time in the history of the world when it was a more tyrannical giant than it is to-day? You cannot walk down the street without seeing some illumined scream of the Picture Palace about ape-

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

men, sheikhs, jungle-love, and the stark realities of primitive passion. 'Primitive' indeed, appears to be the operative word with this sophisticated industry which so pertinaciously seeks to separate the adult child from its Saturday shilling. Why do not these places adopt the name of Sexodrome once and for all? The popular magazines were never more drenched in sexual fiction; their editors will scarcely deign to look at a story unless it throbs to this tune and *tempo* and announces the fact in the first sentence. And now the intellectuals are as sadly beset by Dan Cupid as the Hight Street oaf. Their psychology is a cumbrous crawl down Sinister Street. They are no less sex-frantic than the greasy pornographers of Hollywood, with this difference that they use longer names for simple matters.

Not long ago Mr. Noel Coward actually gave the title of 'Design for Living' to a little comedy about the amorous manœuvres of two trivial men and one trivial woman. Design for living! You would think that the author had attempted something as large as a synthetic philosophy, something as spiritually ambitious as a Platonic Republic, as profound as a Goethean Faust, or at

## SEX IN OUR TIME

least as far-ranging as a Human Comedy on Balzac's lines. But for our age a design for living may concern nothing but the sleeping arrangements. After reading Mr. Coward's comedy I decided that as a design for loving it was more than generous; as a design for living it was inadequate. To a sex-obsessed age there was nothing absurd in the title. Our notions of life seem to have become stabilised somewhere round the hectic imaginings of puberty. The young nowadays are alleged to be uncommonly audacious. It is not a matter of what every young person ought to know; it is what every young person knows, does, and chatters about. But neither the knowledge nor the use of it appears to have brought any relief. For that we must thank the psychologists, who transformed the enjoyment of romance into a cause of agonised self-questioning. It is true that the moralists did that before with their morbid insistence on chastity and their pretence that a few brief minutes of decontrol leave a woman 'fallen', 'ruined' and damned for eternity. Fortunately for the men, it did not appear to matter much about them. We have not escaped from this monkish hysteria; we



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

have merely substituted another. Instead of young people sadly questioning their virtue, they now, and even more miserably, question their lack of it and pitifully go forth to remedy this curse of innocence and to shuffle off the inhibition which the psycho-analysts have taught them to ponder and to dread. The rake's progress is surely none the better when it is turned into a course of psychic hygiene, particularly when the cure leaves the soul even unhealthier than it was before.

That it is the unhealthier is shown by an investigation of contemporary literature. Not long ago I read a long and free-spoken novel about post-war Cambridge, Mr. Rossiter's *Poor Scholars*. I could only decide that the attraction of sexual conversation, always and inevitably strong where the adolescent are living under barrack conditions, has been getting steadily more powerful. Perhaps there is less frank 'smut' than there used to be and more wearisome excursions into theory. There is certainly more monotony of theme than when I was party to the nocturnal pow-wows of young liberty. We did occasionally talk about something else. There was less social freedom then. It was held to be a giddy adventure, a wild

## SEX IN OUR TIME

plunge at licence, when members of men's and women's colleges met on neutral ground to practise some solemnities of debate. You would think that in the more liberal world of to-day there is less repression of instinct among the young and, therefore, less need for sexual palaver. But no. The more they meet the more they brood and the more they blather. The ability to get on terms with sex and to take things for granted—an ability which was not outside the scope of humanity during most of its civilised centuries—has not yet been restored and does, in fact, seem farther off than it was twenty years ago. In a recent comedy, *The Vinegar Tree*, there was a penetrating and most moving study of an undergraduate couple who have argued themselves into such a frenzy about sex by eternal cogitations and long sessions with advanced psychology that they have been reduced to hysterical misery and frantic recriminations about the horrors of innocence. What these two young people really needed was a walk in the moonlight culminating in the licence of a chaste kiss; possibly a mild flirtation on the edge of the tennis-court would have sufficed. But they had read books; they had talked, oh how

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

they had talked, about Libido and repression and similar psychological things. The result was a dithering doubt, a total misery. The substitution of sex-frantic hysteria for the normal happiness of boy-and-girl flirtations I attribute to the Sex Professors, whose works will undoubtedly go first and foremost into any bonfire of mine.

There are, then, two main causes of our present sex-mania. One is the commercial exploitation of a normal and certainly powerful impulse by the tremendous engines of the cinema, the Press, and the stage. It would be absurd to pretend that the appeal has not always been made. The oldest civilised comedy that we know, that of the Greeks, was essentially orgiastic. It was part of a sex-ritual, a festival of freedom in speech and probably in deed, which was at other times denied. But it was used to discuss, inside this frame of a sexual ceremonial, every kind of social, literary, and philosophic question. Aristophanes made his salute to sex – and proceeded to his battles of the poets, his baitings of the philosophers. He knew – and his audience agreed – that men had minds as well as bodies. It may be said that the English Elizabethans wrote much of sex and relied upon

## SEX IN OUR TIME

smutty jokes and physiological puns to raise a laugh. Undoubtedly. Nobody has ever denied that sex is a large part of life. But their theatre was not sex-exploiting or sex-absorbed in the modern manner. It is unlikely that *Othello* had to be marketed for the consumption of the groundlings with much trumpeting about ape-men, sheikhs, and stark, primitive passion. Nobody plunged more deeply into the tragedies and splendours of sex than Shakespeare; he was haunted by its ugliness as much as by its beauty, but the public for which he and his fellows were writing was not sex-frantic. The Elizabethans, in their lustihood, naturally gloried in the tragedies and comedies of love. But they kept proportion, for they were profoundly interested by other themes, particularly by Machiavellian statecraft and the quest of power. When Shakespeare (in what is probably the earliest passage of his dramatic work that we possess) wrote in magnificent phrase about 'The huge army of the world's desires' he was thinking at least as much of 'Fame, whom all hunt after in their lives', as of lasses and lads in mutual pursuit. Behind his major work sex lurks by right, since so it lurks in life. But *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

are tragedies of nerve, will, and temper in their combat with duty, sovereignty, and ambition. What seems so strange nowadays is the neglect of power as the spur of action. Professional pride and the desire to do a good job well are still a strong motive in the rivalries of life. But how many popular films or stories concern themselves with love of craft or even with a more material ambition unless that ambition is given erotic origin and leads to erotic conclusion?

There is a possible explanation of this in the change of tendency in entertainment. The Elizabethans wrote with their eye mainly directed towards a few aristocrats, men living in the pomp of power, fired, often fatally, by its enchantments. But the modern popular author is aiming at millions for whom power and riches are remote possibilities. His patrons are not in palaces – with the headsman round the corner. They are the villa myriads who have as little hope of power and pomp as they have fear of decapitation; they take a sweepstake chance with a laughing knowledge of its vanity, and they never imagine themselves to be potential leaders of the nation or heroes of an insurrection. They go to the office and home

## SEX IN OUR TIME

again. The huge army of the world's desires is narrowed down by circumstance. Sex is their adventure and their dream. Now, for the first time in the world's history, there is a huge machinery of entertainment for this class, employing the camera and the printing press to catch their small change. Naturally that industry exploits the most obvious species of escape. It used to work with tales of true love; now it prefers turbidities of passion, 'stark realities', primitive passion, and the jargon of jungle and the ape-man. Do the escapers really discover the refreshing fruits of emancipation by spending one Saturday night after another in the company of semi-anthropoid eroticism?

The sex-mania of a community has little connection with its sex-practice. Social habits, which would horrify even an Advanced Mind by their licence, are compatible with complete freedom from sex-obsession. Bawdy jesting is natural to all races which have progressed as far as to discover an art of comedy. The English music-hall still maintains the Hellenic functions of a ribald ceremonial. Modern manners—modern hypocrisy, if you insist—do not permit the actors to wear the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

phallus, which was the obligatory decoration of a Greek comedian. But the old popular songs and many of the new odes are essentially phallic odes; they are not as frank as that in Aristophanes's *Acharnians* which begins, 'Phallus, comrade of Bacchus, wanderer by night, adulterer, lover of boys,' a song which the highly civilised Athenians heard undismayed; but they are none the less obvious in their allusions. In a most informative article on 'The Facts of Life in Popular Song', which appeared in *The American Spectator* (August, 1933) Mr. Sigmund Spaeth recorded and analysed the Aristophanic tradition in American vaudeville. The old English habit was to make play with a symbol, 'the end of my old cigar', or 'the spout of the old tin kettle'. The Americans, less inventively, have relied upon the word 'it' or 'that thing'. Wrote Mr. Spaeth:

'Long before "it" became the philosophical symbol of sex-appeal in general, that little neuter pronoun had served as a specific label for the most popular of all human acts. 'Way back in the past century there was a song called "They All Do It", which was considered pretty

## SEX IN OUR TIME

naughty in those days. But there was comparatively little agitation when Irene Bordoni, some years later, sang "Do It Again". George Gershwin composed the music for that song, and he was young enough then to believe that the lyric actually referred to kissing. In any case, the same formula was used with equal success a few years later in "Do, do, do what you've done, done, done before". Since then there have been popular songs called "Let's Do It", "Let's Do It Again", "How Do You Do It?" "Do Something", and "She Wouldn't Do It", tending gradually toward a defeatist attitude. Henry Souvaine stated the problem in a practical and economic fashion when he wrote "Wouldja For a Big, Red Apple?", which was very popular first in the show "Americana", and then in the New York speakeasies.'

That sort of fun, certainly preferable in its franker form, has always been a large element of popular entertainment. Shakespeare went to the brothel, if need be, for his very raw material. But this is no proof that the nation is sex-frantic; on the whole it may be taken as evidence of sex-sanity,



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

particularly when it is accompanied by similar humours of the other appetites. The music-halls, in which it has flourished, have been rich also in the humours of eating and drinking and of the poor man who 'gets away with it'; it is the traditional business of comedy to defy authority and to pull solemnity by the nose. The policeman is always in trouble, the bailiff is kicked downstairs, the rogue has his laugh at the righteous. Marie Lloyd's famous song 'A Little of What You Fancy Does You Good' was the epitome of all popular comedy since man improved upon the animals by learning how to laugh. But note the condition of this benefit. 'A Little of What You Fancy.' This is not the bargaining of an ethical calculation, but an instinctive realisation that the world is going mad when it can think of nothing else but one particular fancy. A music-hall was, as it claimed, a theatre of varieties. It made fun of everything. But a kinema is a theatre of monotonies, ignorant of all but 'it'.

Read the kinema press. Look at the kinema titles. Study the kinema technique. There is only one description for it all, Sex without stint. The cheaper newspapers continually play up to the

## SEX IN OUR TIME

new creed that sex alone is readable. Women are news. Women are pictures. Why women alone appear to contribute Sex Interest is difficult to comprehend, but it seems to be true. Photographers will thread the mountains for pictures of sport. Sport, thus with expense and difficulty captured, turns out to be a pretty lady holding a gun to the obvious danger of all around her. Let us hope that she tactfully lays it aside when the camera-man has departed. What counts is not gun but woman, and not least what this 'Lovely' wears when she motors to the moors. What the photographers have achieved with paper and celluloid is a world in which every young woman has a dream-life of sexual triumphs continually suggested to her mind. The film-stories are mere frames for sexual pursuit; the titles drip with desire. There have been exceptions, Chaplin the clown of eternity, the little man who defies authority. But is not Chaplin out of date? Some witless lump of He-Manliness or the grinning, loose-mouthed love-parader is what Hollywood has imposed on the world as the paragon of creatures. Meanwhile our own town-councillors, reputed vessels of respectability, stimulate sex-consciousness by

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

organising 'Beauty Competitions' which turn the local darlings into bundles of jealous vanity, dreaming only of the magnificent hour when, the Mayor having duly inspected their ankles, they will be driven down the esplanade as Queen of Shrimpton or be photographed for the *Daily Mirror*, on their way to receive a film-test at Elstree. In a world which considers mayoral approval of the ankles to be the qualification of an actress we may fairly say that sex-mania is making very pretty progress. Such a world is demanding a considerable number of conflagrations in order to recover its balance of mind. Fortunately celluloid burns well.

## CHAPTER III

### CUPID AND PSYCHE

THE physical licentiousness of a period is no indication of its state of mind. It is the state of mind which matters far more than the conduct of the body. The Roman voluptuary, even when Rome was at its best, could probably have given points in carnality's carnival to the debauchees of many other nations and many other ages. But the writings and the deeds of Rome do not give us the feeling of a race vitiated and vulgarised by sex. The gentry of the eighteenth century had few restrictions upon their pursuit of pleasure, but their literature suggests that they could be lusty without being lunatic. Or, turning back a century, are we to derive from the frank filth of the Restoration Comedy, which was written for a small clique in the capital, the notion of an England that was either morbidly brooding

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

over its psyche or crassly responsive to any public advertisement of sex appeal? I submit that the following piece of news, taken from an evening paper as I write, would have disgusted a Wycherley or turned the stomach of a Casanova.

## KISS LASTS THREE HOURS.

New York, Monday.

A blonde young woman and a dark-tanned young man held a kiss for three hours and two minutes at Coney Island . . . and won the world's endurance title for kissing.

They were presented with a loving cup.

—REUTER.

The revolting feature of 'sex in our time' is not the presence of a passion which is inevitable and may be glorious, but the incessant, the intolerable exploitation of its meaner forms to stir the desire of a million fools or to titivate the fancies of a bowler-hatted Caliban.

A point worth noticing, as a symptom of suburban eroticism, is the alteration in the technique of popular magazines. They used to offer

## CUPID AND PSYCHE

their public stories of every kind. Only a few years ago it was possible to sell magazines profitably on a basis of humour and adventure with a ration of sentiment thrown in. Now, although Mr. P. G. Wodehouse deservedly remains a powerful creator of circulation, the make-up has, in most cases, been altered in order to smear the whole production with Hollywood notions of sex. Entire pages are devoted to glutinous portraiture of 'stars' in full osculatory action. The ankle-consciousness of 'art editors' finds abundant expression. One expects the trade papers of the film industry to be full of these enticements to visit the local Palasseum; what is significant is that the non-kinematic papers devote almost as much space to this subject as do the specialised journals of Sex City.

Here in front of me is the *Royal Pictorial* (October, 1933), the direct descendant, I believe, of the *Royal Magazine*, in which I once followed the adventures of Captain Kettle and similar heroes of pre-sex-mania days. The *Royal Pictorial* now offers me three short stories of which one is called 'Oh, Mon Oncle', described as a romance with two heroines, and summarised thus, 'They Waited for Each Other, and in the End it was a

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

Pair of Silk Stockings which Bridged the Chasm of the Years.' Another is called 'A Date With an Angel', with the added and not very original remark that 'It Sometimes Pays to Deceive'. Then follow the Special Articles, as follows:

*'The Modern Girl Can Only Say "I Want".'* (This is a sex-to-sex talk between Pamela Frankau and Godfrey Winn.)

*'The Girls I Left Behind Me.'* By a young man who has been to the Seaside.

*'Meet Our Amateur Airman.'* (The only non-sexual article.)

*'Whitewashing Hollywood.'* A protest against respectability.

*'What Is Sex Appeal?'* Interviews with famous film-stars.

*'My Love Affairs.'* Frank Confessions by Claudette Colbert.

*'Good Looks and Bad Luck.'* (Illustrated with the upper and lower parts of film stars.)

*'Henry VIII.'* What his 'wives' think of Charles Laughton.

*'Why Our Marriage Lasts.'* An Interview with Rod La Roque and Vilma Banky.

## CUPID AND PSYCHE

So this is civilisation as presented to the products of Universal Compulsory Education.

Naturally, seeking information, I turn to the views on Sex Appeal by those who surely know. Miss Mae West, photographed in a tiger-skin as 'Hollywood's latest exponent of purple passion', very sensibly replies 'It's the same in any language and you can recognise it when you see it from Alaska to Zanzibar without looking at the guide-book. It's just natural, that's all, honey, and ain't nature grand?' Further comment of Miss West. 'From Eve to Peggy Hopkins Joyce, the gals who have it ain't done so bad by themselves.'

Miss Jean Harlow, the Platinum Peach, photographed with Mr. Clark Gable's lips upon her nose, had this Great and Musical Thought about Sex Appeal. 'I suppose some people just naturally have it, but I think it can be developed, acquired, like playing the accordion.' And so to the Great Gable, who was rehearsing with Miss Harlow. He 'wore a bath-robe in the scene and it was plenty intimate', says the industrious interviewer, Mr. J. Eugene Chisman. 'Here were two of the greatest exponents of sex appeal on the screen, caught in the act. I had come to the right place,



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

but Clark doesn't like to talk about such matters.'

But I certainly raise my hat to the reticent Mr. Gable who, when asked the nature of Sex Appeal and kindly vouchsafing a word, said that it was just being attractive to the other sex. Could the art of definition go further? Unfortunately the contemplative and now quite loquacious Clark went on to attempt a paradox. 'It is appeal without sex mixed up in it.' Then he returned to box-office sanity. 'Pictures wouldn't be where they are to-day if it wasn't for it.' Agreed. Moving on to Mr. Lubitsch we learn that you can't sell soap without sex appeal. One presumes that he knows. After which we may proceed to the confessions of the Screen's Most Beautiful Siren, Miss Colbert. Still 'seeking the indescribable something' Miss Colbert observes, 'I had never played a role that called for more than a mild naughtiness. I wanted to go the whole length. I wanted to play with fire. As the Ruritanian Empress in *To-Night is Ours* I burned my boats, cast discretion to the winds, and braved the wrath of my kingdom for one night of ecstasy with Frederic March.'

Without endeavouring to discover the reactions

## CUPID AND PSYCHE

of the happy Fred, we may leave it there. That will do for to-day's lesson. So it runs, on and on and on. Here is the popular reading-matter of the time, the culture of the enfranchised democracy of the twentieth century. Need I insist again that my objections are not those of the Puritan? I do not want to spoil anybody's sport. What is so revolting about modern love is not that it happens in fact but that it happens in fiction and happens there with such monotony, happens with such mawkishness, and happens over such acres of photogravure. Sex as the core of life is inevitable; sex as the sugar coating laid inches deep upon the fruit is tedious and disgusting.

Dr. Johnson observed that 'love is only one of many passions and it has no great influence on the sum of life'. That is a sensible and straightforward judgment, as applied to the whole of human history. History, at least in so far as it is a chronicle of individual achievements, is a panorama of power desired, won, lost, and won again. Sometimes a great lover deemed the world well lost for love; to such as Antony kingdoms were small change for kisses. But how rare, when we come to reflect on it, are the cases in which history has

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

been thus determined. Reasons of vanity, reasons of greed, reasons of hunger and hate, reasons of a social or a military ambition, sometimes even the simple desire to benefit humanity have been the condition of great cosmic movements and upheavals. Yet, in the midst of our sex-drenched psychology, Dr. Johnson's view would be regarded by many as a ludicrous paradox. If 'by the sum of life' we mean important political events, the judgment is still true. But, if we mean the general consciousness, it is no longer valid. The sex-maniacs, the sex-exploiters have been too busy. Let some brave fellow take the Johnsonian view to Hollywood! His chance of employment as a librettist would not be large in a film-factory where every story has to be falsified and bedizened with an idiotic cabaret scene and irrelevant troops of semi-naked blondes before it is considered to be of any value in the great market of the entertainment world. If Hollywood were to follow the English fashion of 1933 and dramatise the Brontë family, one could rely upon the story being held up interminably in Brussels in order to show M. Héger taking Charlotte to a song-and-dance house of a considerable impropriety where they enjoy a

## CUPID AND PSYCHE

spectacle of truly crural 'cuties'. An army may march on its stomach, but a film strides to victory on its legs.

It is bad enough to have the popular mind saturated by the commercialists of sex and the merchants of desire. It is even more serious that the self-appointed intellectuals should be surrendering to this insanity. You cannot now move a hand or walk upstairs without some half-baked student of the new psychology informing you that this is an action of profound sexual significance. I have already alluded to the happy Freudian notion that a side-step in the street betokens your rapacious instinct. But such ideas do not stop at anything so honest as rape. It is now the common view among the bookworms of sexual theory and also among the smart little fools who pick up and repeat the nonsense and the jargon of this school that a normal human friendship between two people of the same sex is impossible. In the fashionable books and plays of to-day affection is an almost invisible quality. There are no longer any friends. There are only 'lovers', and that is a flattering word for the creatures. So far has this nonsense gone that two men or two women seen

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

commonly in each other's company immediately incur the titters and the whispers of the Advanced Minds, whose owners start to rap out their little jokes about homosexuality. If two people of the same sex associate frequently they are deemed homosexual. For two girls to share a flat is to have Lesbos assigned to them as an unspiritual home.

But the nuisance can proceed even further than that. For it is one of the charming features of the new psychology that if you are fond of your own sex you are a pervert; if you show no such fondness, they will immediately tell you that you are really burning with that libido, but are most unhealthily suppressing the flames. These clever folk get you either way. If a man likes men, he is homosexual; if he doesn't like men he is a repressed homosexual and that is far worse for him. From such a bogus dilemma there is obviously no logical escape. You can only tell your counsellor to go and put his head in a bag and boil it; in other words, commit to the flames. I know perfectly well what the new psychology's answer will be to my analysis of 'sex in our time'. It will be that I, not they, suffer from the sex-obsession and that I would not notice these things

## CUPID AND PSYCHE

unless I was an inhibited libertine, who ought to be curing myself by orgies of self-indulgence. I have already experienced that imbecile retort, when commenting on the monotony of some play which demanded two hours of my attention for the unutterably wearisome lusts of some indescribably trivial specimens of the rich unemployable. I was informed by an uninvited correspondent that my notice betrayed me as a hard case. What I really wanted, deep in my unhygienic and subconscious Ego, was a jolly week-end among these splendid specimens of the Great Uninhibited. As the American lady in Munich succinctly said when the Nazi Brave threw her cigarette into her beer, 'Well, now, can you beat that?'

Mr. Chesterton has often pointed out that the dogmatism of priests is a mere trifle compared with the dogmatism of professors. At the name of science every mind shall abdicate; we shall believe what we are told just as meekly as any Catholic peasant submits to his spiritual papa. Let the men of science loose among the green pastures of sex and what roarings and caperings may we not expect from these bull-calves of the new psychology? In Mr. Gollancz's *Outline of Modern*

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

*Knowledge* – Knowledge, be it noted, not Opinion – Psycho-Analysis is discussed by Professor J. C. Flugel, B.A., D. Sc., Assistant Professor of Psychology in the University of London. It may be said, for the Professor's defence, that he does modestly call his article 'Theories of Psycho-Analysis', but what theories they are! For any examination of modern sex-mania the article is invaluable. It also suggests that the students of London University, who are attached to this faculty, will have plenty to talk about when the lecture is over.

Discussing sexual symbolism (p. 363) Professor Flugel says:

'Let us take the wonderful lamp of Aladdin, which will afford the gratification of every wish. Here it should be plain enough, once it is pointed out, that the lamp itself is a symbol of the phallus and the happiness to be derived from it (by the appropriate magical gestures) a scarcely veiled allusion to sexual gratification. But why a lamp? The middle term is here supplied by the idea of warmth and fire, which seem always and everywhere to be associated

## CUPID AND PSYCHE

with love, passion, and sensuality, as is shown in such common expressions as "on heat", "a warm embrace", "an ardent affection", "hot stuff", "a burning desire" (with which compare "a frigid woman" and "a chilly reception") and in the innumerable rituals in which fire plays a part, from the religious creation of fire (by friction) among primitive peoples to the lamp-lighting ceremonies of certain present-day societies.'

So now we know what happens when the Freudians are at large among the fairy-tales. We also know that anybody who lights a lamp or a fire is revealing his libido. 'Toc H.', with its Lamps of Remembrance, is apparently a band of phallic roysterers and the title of this book shows the kind of fellow that I must be. Presumably, if anybody lights a fire to warm his toes or a lamp to read by on dark nights, he is symbolically expressing his inhibited lusts. As for those who kindle a bonfire, fondly imagining that they are getting rid of the garden rubbish, little they know of what they are about.

The ingenious Professor then proceeds to point



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

out that dwarfish figures, like Mr. Punch, are all phallic symbols. I hope that the publishers of *Punch* will immediately take note of this and alter the image and superscription on a journal that is so obviously devised for respectable domestic consumption.

‘Let us now take two more difficult cases to contrast with these. There is a considerable amount of evidence to show that a cloak or mantle may often serve as a phallic symbol. . . . The missing link is to be found, once again, in the notion of warming, which is, of course, the function of a cloak.’

This certainly tells the world what Sir Walter Raleigh had in mind. And a Virgin Queen too! How simple does history become when you have been to school with Herr Doktor Freud. Anything which keeps you warm is a phallic symbol; therefore the only way to avoid being phallic is to go about stark naked. But in that case you would be a Narcissist or an Exhibitionist. As I have already pointed out, these nimble-witted fellows have you either way. For them you are just a lump of sex

## CUPID AND PSYCHE

and, whether you put your clothes on or whether you take them off, you obligingly prove their case. If you sit without a fire you are practising deliberate sex-cruelty (masochism) on yourself! if you light a fire you are seeking self-gratification with a phallic symbol.

But better still is coming.

‘Scarcely less obscure is the symbolisation of coitus by means of climbing or walking up stairs. Here the essential common thoughts are those of rhythmic movement and the actual position adopted in the reproductive act.’

The only way of escape in this case appears to be to live in a bungalow. Presumably if you occupy a building with a lift, the ‘rhythmic movement’ of your upward and downward progress is essentially sexual and just as indicative of what your Sub-Conscious intends as going up and down stairs.

One would think that by this time the psychoanalyst’s eye, in its fine frenzy rolling, had wandered to the furthest limits of absurdity. But you cannot hold a good man down and Professor Flugel is a very good scout indeed when the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

Tally-ho has been sounded and the Sexual Snark has to be hunted from its lair. 'Symbols are, as will perhaps have been gathered by this time, extremely numerous and varied.' It has been gathered. But Professor Flugel is nothing if not explicit. Among the more important symbols of the human body, 'especially the genital regions' are

'long, pointed objects, weapons, knives and other instruments, serpents, fish, Zeppelins, all these being male symbols. The corresponding female symbols are hollow round objects, jewels, gardens and flowers. The process of tumescence is often symbolised by flying, while the human body as a whole is most often represented by buildings (with doors and windows corresponding to the bodily orifices), and by landscapes (with hills and valleys corresponding to the protuberances and depressions of the body—cp. the anatomical term "Mons Veneris"—and woods corresponding to the hairs). Dancing, climbing and other rhythmic movements represent coitus, while sliding, and extraction or losing of teeth, correspond to auto-erotic activities.'

## CUPID AND PSYCHE

There is a great deal more, but that, I think, will do for to-day. At least you know now what your Sub-Conscious is up to when you next have a tooth out at the dentist's, or pick up a knife to eat some fish. You know also what those landscape artists have foaming in the Ego. Hills and valleys and woods! Freud only knows what sinister psychic complications went to make a canvas of Constable's. And as for architects, putting in those doors and windows at the dictation of a Phallic Libido! They may add gardens with flowers round the doors and windows! Alas, poor Marvell who wrote of his garden,

'Fair Quiet, I have found thee here  
And Innocence thy sister dear!  
Mistaken long—'

Mistaken he certainly was, if Professor Flugel knows anything about the symbolic significance of a daisy. A primrose by the river's brim no simple primrose is to him.

How one can deal with this kind of thing except by requesting the reader to gaze upon it in wonder? We might, of course, commit it to the flames. But that, as we have learned, would be

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

just another betrayal of our phallic yearnings and almost as significant as putting on an overcoat. But there is surely no further need to emphasise the point that the modern sex-mania is not limited to the vendors of films and magazines. The intellectuals have a fair share of the best rooms in this Bedlam.

## CHAPTER IV

### ROMANTIC NOTIONS

PURSUING our studies in sex let us now pass from the Analytical Chemist of the new psychology to a subject which ought to offer us, according to all conventional ideas, some light and colourful relief. I refer to Romance. The word 'Romance' began life by meaning the vernacular language of France as opposed to Latin; it was then applied to tales of chivalry in which a noble Christian taught pagan dogs the meaning of Christianity with his hot temper and his cold steel. These testy and tiresome people, film-stars born before their time, usually put their 'swords at the disposal of pretty ladies; hence the amorous element implicit in 'romantic fiction'. After this romantic came to mean anything from the poetry of Wordsworth to the acting of Henry Irving. 'Strangeness with beauty,' said Pater. That, again,

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

implies anything you will. At present romance has passed into the hands of a craft called Publicity.

One of the most striking achievements of this craft has been the rapid destruction of the English language. Inevitably so, for if all boosters, propagandists and advertisers are engaged in mortal rivalry, each shouting his ware or his cause louder than anybody else, our unhappy vocabulary is certain to crack beneath the strain. Take, for instance, the word 'thrill'. This used to have a definite physiological connotation; it was magically used by Shakespeare in his 'thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice'. Now it is applied to any kind of exciting event or to any triviality fondly deemed to be exciting. The popular press has to offer a hundred thrills daily. If an actress slips on a banana-skin it is a thrill. Naturally the sensational film has to offer thrills by the thousand. The poor, overworked word has now become so tamed and blunted by this ill-usage that the harassed Publicity Man, after deep thinking, has taken to writing about 'super-thrills'. This not very ingenious method of assisting a fainting language reached its climax in the recent advertise-

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

ment issued by a Road House, which offered its discriminating public the spectacle and the service of 'Super Super Barmaids', which must surely be as flameworthy a piece of writing as ever appeared in print. Obviously one of the words seized and slaughtered by Publicity would be this vague and alluring term, romance. Romance, we know, is glamorous. And what exactly has happened to glamour? I can only tell you that one of the 'Love-me-to-night' kind of films was recently advertised as being in its 'Eighth Glamorous Week'. So we know how glamour, that lustrous noun, is rising in the world. Romance is also having its ups as well as its downs.

Certainly, the term 'romance' has long ceased to mean anything definite when set at the head of a magazine article. It is apparently applicable to the rise of any millionaire who has become shadily and swiftly rich or to the actress who lives with him for gain and has been given star parts because he has bought a theatre, along with his yacht and racing stable. When you see a column headed 'West End Star's Romance' you ought to know what to think and when to stop reading. Thus we are confronted with a curious situation. While



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

it is the boast of the young that they are 'hard-boiled', that they know what's what, that there are no flies on them, and so forth, while it is still the prevailing literary fashion to 'debunk' the heroes of the past and to knock the stuffing out of glory, the vocabulary of our popular reading is still extremely rich in romantic phrases. If anything belongs to the age of romance, it is a crusade. Now the word 'crusade' is applicable to any commercial drive; an appeal to chew more gum could be called a crusade without raising a smile from the millions towards whom the masticatory invitation was impelled. You may see the word 'saga' applied to the rather grubby history of a football club which has bought and sold players and has even done that with insufficient skill to make the business pay. I once observed a summons to Americans to go on what was accurately known as a 'booze cruise'—i.e., a sea trip outside the Prohibition area, with all bars and bottles open and no particular destination—and I noted that the said potential mariners were simultaneously advised of the luxury of the liner engaged (Louis-Seize card-room and probably a Plantagenet cocktail bar) and then challenged to cultivate 'the Viking

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

Spirit'. They were to plank down the dollars for a well-upholstered trip and to embark at the same time on such a hazardous, romantic enterprise as might have stirred the pulse of the old sea-kings. That the undertaking might be menacing to the liver was possible; that it needed the gallantry of Erik the Red, Jarl the Thunderbolt, old Uncle Knut Nilsson and all was unlikely. But I do not suppose that many American citizens were nauseated or even smiled disdainfully at reading this rhetoric about the Vikings.

The publicity of travel is soaked in this romantic jargon. Sometimes there may be a little justification for taking the high and mighty line. It may be reasonable to throw a noble adjective over castles in Spain or to toss a line of star-y-pointing poetry to the Isle of Skye. But one can no longer endure the verbal hogwash of a medieval appeal to use a modern hair-oil on the ground that this will transform the office-boy into a Very Parfait Knight of Chivalry. Nothing will more surely deflect me from a certain brand of pants than the suggestion that to be thus under-garbed is to become a Bit of Old Chaucer. You would think that our realistic young, dashing grimly about on

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

motor bicycles, would like their house of call to be made of total steel and called 'The Accelerator' or 'The Sparking Plug'. Far from it. Observe some of the roadside architecture and you will find it assuming thatch and oak, while bogus romantics are peppering the villages with 'Ye Olde', a phrase which happens to be neither history nor sense nor romance nor anything but flat ignorance. 'Ye' was not Tudor for 'the'; it is simply a misreading of the abbreviated 'the' of the common script. There should be a solemn league and covenant of all sensible persons never to enter any shoppe or buy any thing which solicits attention with a 'Ye'.

Romance in our time has had to change its tune. But the arrival of Young Love as a hard-boiled brace making the country lanes revolting with their speed and stink and noise cannot destroy the permanent and puissant appeal of sentimental drivel. Very popular fiction still thrives on its very happy ending and the charming assumption that wedding-bells are the guarantee of a perennial felicity. But the maid may now have pre-nuptial adventures and need not reach the altar in all the innocence of a dewy rose-bud. Furthermore, since many millions of British feuilleton-readers now

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

vote Labour, it has been decided in the feuilleton-factories that the capture of a Prince is not necessary to the bliss of the Beggar Maid. Yet again, since her ladyship no longer disdains to keep a shop or to sell antiques on a nice percentage of commission, the idea of Marrying into the Peerage has wilted in favour of Marrying into the Garage. After all, motor cars sell better than antiques.

But the rules laid down – and very definite rules are laid down by the employers who commission serial stories – have recently altered. At least that is my information from one who works to order in this market. The heroine – it is always a heroine, not a hero – must be a working girl of tempting beauty; that ordinance is everlasting; but she must not any longer marry her rich employer or end up in the peerage. She now marries a nice young fellow who earns a fiver a week as garage foreman, works twelve hours a day, and comes home to love in a cottage. That is a very remarkable breach of tradition, for the essence of romance has always been snobbery. The English romantic tradition derives from the Middle Ages with their Orders of Chivalry which provided a social ranking according to birth and wealth; the idea of the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

horse as the sign of splendour and of the cavalry as 'the nobs' still lives in the British Army and actually had a good deal to do with appointment to high command in the recent war, where cavalry were generally useless. It survives very strongly among the members of the Idle Rich Class. The mob may worship 'the ace' of speed-boat, speed-car, or Schneider Cup seaplane. But the gentry still pin their faith in horsemanship as the main prop of social glory. The more expensive illustrated papers offer abundant evidence that the real business of aristocracy is to be photographed on or about a horse.

Sentimental fiction had, until quite recently, to be rigidly faithful to this medieval notion of the Mounted Knight. The working-girl's bliss was to attain union with Chivalry in this equestrian and plutocratic sense. But then came the motor car, which has substituted Orders of Cylyndry for Orders of Chivalry. Now that almost any young man may be a Knight on Wheels or a Lochinvar of the Pillion the necessity of marrying into Horseback Hall is no longer so obvious to the young lady of Poverty Corner. Besides, she might even think a title to be a nuisance, so far has the demo-

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

cratic tendency meandered into feminine hearts. Hence the Husband as Faithful Mechanic, the heroine as thrifty wife. Romance in popular fiction has not perished and probably cannot fade away. But it can sever the relations with the heraldic, chivalric, medieval traditions which have been so long sustained. It can change its quarters and its quartering, preferring a motor bicycle rampant to a stable full of hunters, and the cottage by the garage to the castle with the coronet.

It must exceedingly surprise many people to learn that the world has often managed to get on without love-stories. Is the *Iliad* a love story? Is the *Odyssey*? Both contain love; they would not be true to life if they did not. But neither fusses over love. The loveliness of Helen is asserted, not described. The Greeks and Romans, like the men of the Middle Ages, had done what we cannot do; they had got on terms with sex; they laughed at it or they glorified it according to their mood. They made songs about it, beautiful or bawdy, as they felt the need. But they did not brood over it. Nor did they vulgarly exploit it. Young and unselfconscious nations able to face the facts of life, without shame or psycho-analysis, do not need the modern

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

dishonesty of phrase which covers with a spurious, romantic radiance that which men really and wrongly believe to be somewhat murky.

When Meredith defined romance as 'fiddling harmonics on the strings of sensuality' he brilliantly summarised the truth. Accordingly, nations which accept the sensuous and even sensual without queasiness of conscience can very well do without romance; their refusal to be shocked naturally shocks the generations which have been afflicted with easy and frequent visitations of shame and therefore find it necessary to get round the unmentionable by mentioning it only in terms of romance. 'Biological necessities will always be made respectable.' Yes, but there are ways and means. The commonest way to make sex respectable is to tie it up in romantic ribbons.

What seems to us the incredible licence of Athenian comedy was taken as normal by the Athenian people; inheriting fertility rites which were frank and furious, they laughed at the physical aspects of sex in the same way that medieval Christians made farces of the Bible stories. It is only those who are nervous of their facts or their faith who dare not find a source of fun in them,

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

and the Athenians were not in the least frightened of sex. There were no silences, no concealments. Their comic actors wore the phallus on the stage as their badge of office. It is almost unthinkable to people emerging from the era of concealments and evasions that there was no protest against such a frank, unquestioning revelry in the forces of creation.

But when the change came it was not enough to suppress a natural force and basic impulse. Suppression so often fails; there had to be a way round. Hence the sublimation of the life-force by investing it with the ideas and phraseology of romance. So came the dawn of romantic love, the fiddling of harmonics on the sensual string. The biological necessity was made respectable by the claim that the desire of one sex for another, the eagerness of both for reproduction, and the hunger for such immortality as children can bestow could be turned, by sacerdotal sanction, into a glorious manifestation of Christian virtue. It was not only that the old frankness vanished from comedy and revellings; it was actually asserted that the flesh was the devil's province. But only by flesh could the race continue; therefore the blessing of the



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

priest was a magic which could transmute the sinful to the splendid and sublime.

By the time we reach Victorian England the respectable poetry of the period has become a veritable love-feast with the Tennyson observation that all who shut out love shall howl in utter darkness, and Browning's preposterous question,

'What's the earth,  
With all its art, verse, music, worth  
Compared with love, found, gained, and kept?'

The answer, to anyone who is not drunk with amorous romanticism, is perfectly simple and succinct. The reply, in short, is 'Quite a lot'.

There had existed, between the Middle Ages and the Victorians' romantic debauch, some intervals of sanity. The Elizabethans could touch romantic strings as sweetly as any, but they did not care to fiddle false harmonics. Shakespeare, who always saw both sides of a case, could announce the almost Tennysonian sentiment that 'Love is a spirit, all compact of fire'. But none felt more strongly the humiliation forced on man by the tyrannies of sense. Sometimes he could be as frankly pagan as the Greeks —

l 'Love is too young to know what conscience is,'

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

but, being himself the sensuous type that is both strongly tempted and fiercely revolted by the stings of sensuality, he could as strongly curse 'the expense of spirit in a waste of shame' as he could bless the spirit 'all compact of fire'. Certainly in his middle period he was haunted by the ferocious domination of sex. The rage of Lear and Timon includes the poignant cry of one who flees from sex and cannot escape it.

The Elizabethans wrote in a world which was just escaping from the romantic tradition of the Middle Ages. That tradition was powerful and widespread and it had particularly singled out love for its application, because Christianity was in prolonged conflict with the deep-rooted paganism of the peasant who remembered the old gods of Nature although he had invested them with the new names come out of Jewry. Thus the Church had to glorify in its own way the impulses which it could not obliterate. Mr. Chesterton, in his book on Chaucer, has thus described the medieval attitude:

'Medieval romance, which was a sort of pattern for modern romance, came from the vividness

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

of visionary or spiritual experience, leaving a sort of glamour or glory around all experience. But it did throw that coloured light especially on the experience of love and, in some sense, modelled romance on religion; as Chaucer called the legendary lovers "The Saints of Cupid".'

Shortly after reading that I noticed some publicity about a film whose subject was the same as Chaucer's – namely, legendary lovers. There was nothing strange in that, since all films appear to be about legendary lovers. But I have not yet seen a film called 'The Saints of Cupid'; films are usually called 'Sinners in Hell' or 'Ashes of Desire'. This one, it may be added, was called 'Hot Saturday'. I have not seen the affair, which, no doubt, throws a coloured light upon experience, but scarcely in the sense which Mr. Chesterton had in mind when he defined romance.

The modern title is certainly ugly; but it is also certainly frank. Indeed, if an accurate description of modern week-end paganism be desired I can imagine no better title. We are all of us, I suppose,

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

romantics when romanticism is true to the glory of Mr. Chesterton's definition; if a super-normal vision can surround plain objects with glory and communicate that glory to us our state is the richer. There must be very few people who austere-ly refuse to enjoy 'Romeo and Juliet' because they hold that all this glorious noise has nothing to do with love, which is only, in their opinion, a psycho-physical product of glandular attributes. On the other hand, the revolt against romanticism is perfectly justified when it protests against the application of romantic auras to mere lust and selfishness.

The Victorian father who loved his wife so well as to make her the mother of ten children in ten years is the natural object of our disgust because we dislike the glorification of a domesticity which is one long round of toil and pain. The man who can call such a father a Saint of Cupid is certainly a romantic; he is also a sadist or simpleton. The weakness of a romantic age is not that it accepts and communicates the vision splendid, but that it so easily begins to spread a treacly deposit of sentiment over particularly nasty forms of self-indulgence, such as profligate fertility or vulgar

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

acquisition of riches. It was an extraordinary feature of Dickens that, while he riddled with his sarcasm the bogus romance of the self-made plutocrat, he was so much surfeited by the Victorian love-feast, so soaked in the romantic hocus-pocus of the Happy Home and Prolific Marriage-bed, that he could visualise as the Saints of Cupid the fathers who were in fact the Tyrants of Fertility and the wives who were its slaves. To have a dozen children and 'lose' half a dozen of them was normal Victorian practice based on a horrid compound of callousness and domestic incompetence. A generation which prefers to deromanticise this kind of 'love' and this kind of parenthood and call them by harsher names is doing some good in the world.

That is exactly what Bernard Shaw set out to do. He soon had many followers, both in the left-wing theatre and in fiction. The Happy English Home was submitted to an intense bombardment and all Edwardian boys and girls who did any reading at all were made to feel that, if they were not wildly happy in the parental nest, there must be something seriously wrong with them. Romance in all its manifestations,

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

military and civil, was stripped of its fripperies. Glamour was committed to the flames. In Shaw's heaven 'you face things as they are; you escape nothing but glamour'. There you can lay aside the 'tedious, vulgar pursuit of happiness'. On Shaw's reformed earth romantic love will give place to

'The great central purpose of breeding the race, ay, breeding it to heights now deemed superhuman; that purpose which is now hidden in a mephitic cloud of love and romance and prudery and fastidiousness, will break through into clear sunlight as a purpose no longer to be confused with the gratification of personal fancies, the impossible realisation of boys' and girls' dream of bliss, or the need of older people for companionship or money. The plain-spoken marriage services of the vernacular Churches will no longer be abbreviated and half suppressed as indelicate. The sober decency, earnestness and authority of their declaration of the real purpose of marriage will be honoured and accepted, whilst their romantic vowings and pledgings and until-death-do-us-partings and

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

the like will be expunged as unbearable frivolities.'

No room for glory here!

But there was bound to be a rebellion against the Shavian austerities. Glory and glamour were to come again. The young were to have their sentimentality preserved and even enhanced. Shaw had reduced love to a biological necessity. In *Back to Methuselah* he outlined a future free altogether from the dominion of the senses and all such emotional raptures. There arrived in D. H. Lawrence the first voice of the romantic reaction presented in a form tolerable to the intellectuals. For him sex provided ecstatic communions. Naturally he did not attempt to revive the old romanticism of the Happy English Home or to restore glamour to the institution of holy matrimony. That, no doubt, will come in time. He did not fuss about among ethical salvations. That had been the stock-in-trade of his predecessors, Shaw offering salvation by Socialism, Wells salvation by science, and Kipling salvation by sahibs. Lawrence was no instructor in Morals for an Advanced Community. He was determined to rescue sex

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

from the laboratory and to give it glamour once again. This led him into orgies of emotionalism in which profane love was given all the romantic ribbons once allotted to the sacred variety. It took him a considerable time to meet with any comprehension among the young, who had become so accustomed to the Shavian view of sex and the realists' contempt for glory that they were at first completely baffled by the yearnings and groanings and screams of triumph of Lawrentian eroticism. Shaw had made Love seem so simple and cerebral; Lawrence made it complicated and carnal once again. Before Lawrence died he had found his glory and the romantic reaction had won the plaudits of an undergraduate public which, twenty years before, was perfectly content with the less exhilarating attractions of a Life Force severely harnessed to the service of Socialism and working grimly away to fill the world with total abstainers vowed to Ibsen, Wagner, Vegetables and Sidney Webb.



## CHAPTER V

### BROTHER LAWRENCE

THE intellectuals' revolt against Victorian romanticism, which included the pagan jollities of Swinburne as well as the Tennysonian hymning of a Church of England Venus, was a long, laborious battle. Imported Ibsen put a charge of dynamite below the Happy Home; Shaw not only ignited this charge, but brought up abundant explosives of his own in order to bombard the whole line of romantic fortresses. The attack was naturally met with every kind of civil and religious persecution. Your romantic is essentially a devotee of concealment; he prefers petticoats to plain statements; to hide is to suggest mysterious delights. For this reason Authority is often on the side of the romantics; concealment is their passion. 'Women,' said the realistic Arnold Bennett, 'are much alike except that they conceal the fact of

## BROTHER LAWRENCE

bifurcation.' The remark is a little out of date in our realistic age of the She-Hiker and the Sun-Cult. But to admit the fact of bifurcation was the supreme offence in Victorian England; hence the scandalisation of the elect when young ladies attempted to bicycle in knickers and so made the 'nineties seem naughtier than ever. Even the most respectable of masculine trousers could be called 'unmentionables'. It was the business of authorship to hide; it was the business of profitable authorship to hide with plenty of suggestive frills and flounces. Those who would not hide and despised the romantic frills were badgered and banned and proscribed. To discuss, even with the utmost scientific calm, the facts of sex was actually a crime against the community. Young curiosity, forbidden to read the solemn tomes of Havelock Ellis, had to do its best for itself by gazing through the shop-windows of the dingier chemists who mingled a 'library of science' with the lover's armoury. It was not only the Christian obscurantists with their long tradition of persecution behind them who hunted down the outspoken; the Lord Chamberlain was in his office to save the stage from any suggestion of intellectual honesty and to

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

make the English theatre ridiculous in the eyes of the world. But the sapping and mining of the realists were effective in the end. The old defences of hypocrisy were broken through. 'Decency,' wrote Shaw, 'is indecency's conspiracy of silence.' The conspiracy has been largely overthrown. More or less, we can say what we like.

Victories are always abused. 'Saying what you like' can have extremely monotonous results. Mere childishness could masquerade as frankness and often did. The result was wearisome novels in which the operative word was 'obscene' and the smart plays which have been wittily summarised by Mr. Knoblock as 'going from bed to worse'. But the victory was a victory and the reading public could now, if they chose, study the facts of life in fiction which had no longer to discover clumsy circumlocutions for the ordinary functions of the human body. Shaw had begun to conquer the middle class with his prefaces long before he conquered the box-office with his plays and every Edwardian undergraduate knew his definition of holy wedlock as 'the maximum of temptation combined with the maximum of opportunity'. Schoolboys in the Upper Sixth read *Men and*

## BROTHER LAWRENCE

*Supermen* when they should have been applying themselves to Sallust and had *The G.B.S. Calendar* in their studies, thus enjoying a kick in the pants for romanticism for every day of the year.

The young readers of to-day are the children of the Wellsians and the Shavians, and it is the nature – and possibly the duty – of the young to loathe and despise the favourite author of their parents. After all, even if an author does call a tart a tart, even if he employs the adjective bloody in every paragraph, that does not make him readable for ever and the young began to grow weary of realism about prostitutes, of the adventures of erotic scientists who always took somebody's wife to Greenland in order to work it off and talk it over, and of the dingy veracities of adolescence, pursued from the Lower School to Leicester Square. You cannot walk down Sinister Street for ever; the place becomes as boring as the Cromwell Road. So, after the War, there was a public ready for a break with realism, even for romanticism, provided it was not of the rosy Victorian type.

It was then that D. H. Lawrence became popular. A few well-disposed highbrows had endeavoured to do something about Lawrence before the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

War, but Lawrence was a difficult person to help and had a considerable talent for being rude to his friends. This rudeness endeared him to some women, who appeared to find in him a kind of intellectual sheikh and would put up with anything from 'caro Lorenzo'. But when the railing is put to paper and then, rather unkindly, pulled out and printed in the vast volume of Lawrence's letters which appeared in 1932, it looks poor enough. I cannot understand why Mr. Aldous Huxley, a great friend and admirer of Lawrence, should have done him the disservice of publishing dozens of trivial and personal notes, many of which only give the world the impression of a whining, cantankerous personality. Obviously Lawrence was a great deal larger than that. There was little enough reason to preserve these scribbles; none to publish them. They were for the flames.

What the new public, bored by the realism so dear to its parents, really enjoyed was the romantic in Lawrence. 'You may turn out Nature with a pitch-fork, but she will always return.' Yearnings for romance are a part of human nature and have the same recurring power. Whether by process of logic or by intuition Lawrence had seen that the

## BROTHER LAWRENCE

time for sentimentality had come again. 'I don't want to write like Galsworthy nor Ibsen nor Strindberg nor any of them, even if I could. We have to hate our immediate predecessors.' He explicitly set to work to get away from the idol-smashing of the dominant realists. He would set up gods and worship. The obvious line was simply to grovel in front of something which other people had called the very devil. Unchastity, for instance. The Victorians had raged against it and the Edwardians had made dry, realistic statements about Free Love. No dry, realistic statements for Lawrence! He would make much more noise than that as he danced round the phallus-pole. Accordingly he set to work to idealise and romanticise unchastity, exactly as the Victorians had idealised and romanticised chastity.

It was really very easy to do. Mother-love, always a common receptacle for sentimental dithering, has naturally evoked a great deal of fuss about the nobility of parturition. Lawrence, by orating about the Return to the Woman, laid a second lather of sentiment onto the fact of procreation. He also gingered up that music-hall favourite, the 'Dear Old Mammy o' Mine' stuff,

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

by mixing it up in a horrible emotional stew with the fag-ends of Freudian jargon and by dumping in Old Man Œdipus as the onion in this hotpot. In the volume of letters is to be found a Foreword to 'Sons and Lovers', which is well worth reading for an understanding of the Lawrentian psyche.

'And God the Father, the Inscrutable, the Unknowable, we know in the Flesh, in Woman. She is the door for our in-going and our out-coming. In her we go back to the Father; but, like the witness of the Transfiguration, blind and unconscious.

'Yea, like bees in and out of a hive, we come backwards and forwards to our woman.

'For in the flesh of the woman does God exact Himself. And out of the flesh of the woman does He demand; "Carry this of Me forth to utterance." And if the man deny, or be too weak, then shall the woman find another man, of greater strength. And if, because of the Word, which is the Law, she does not find another man, nor he another woman, then shall they both be destroyed.

'But the man who is the go-between from

## BROTHER LAWRENCE

Woman to Production is the lover of that woman. And if that Woman be his mother, then is he her lover in part only; he carries for her, but is never received into her for his confirmation and renewal, and so wastes himself away in her flesh. The old son-lover was Ædipus. The name of the new one is legion. And if a son-lover take a wife, then is she not his wife, she is only his bed. And his life will be torn in twain, and his wife in her despair shall hope for sons, that she may have her lover in her hour.'

There are pages of this rhetoric. One need not read very much to agree with Mr. Wyndham Lewis that 'a sentimentalism like the smell of bad eggs rises from all the works of Mr. Lawrence'. To be thus portentously sentimental on the subject of incest may surely be described as the creation of a horrid stench; and the place for bad eggs is the fire.

There are some people who must always be rubbing themselves against the Infinite, like cows against a fence. Lawrence was of that kind. But he did not ease himself with ordinary religion.



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

He seems to have had a very poor idea of Jesus. 'Must you really write about Jesus?', he asked, perhaps with reason, of Mr. J. M. Murry. 'Jesus becomes more *unsympatisch* to me, the longer I live; crosses and nails and tears and all that stuff! I think he showed us into a nice *cul de sac*.' There's the brave Nietzschean for you! But, none the less, mystic yearnings continually filled the Lawrentian bosom. If Christianity would not do, why not Sex? On to this theme Lawrence accordingly directed his ample vein of biblical spouting.

I am not for a moment questioning Lawrence's capacity to do certain things uncommonly well. Although I do not find it easy to be interested in many of his characters, perhaps because they have too much of Lawrence and too little of life, I would be the first to acknowledge his power of atmospheric creation. I have never managed to finish *Kangaroo*, because the narrative quality is so much less than the descriptive. But as a piece of social landscape the picture of Australian life is superb. Lawrence was able to see things with incomparable freshness; he could write about them as though they had never happened before. But I am not attempting an essay in literary criticism;

## BROTHER LAWRENCE

I am examining states of mind and viewing Lawrence as the voice of a generation which has chosen to give him especial veneration. I do not choose to speculate about his private life, although the less judicious Lawrentians have made abundant copy of it and it is now fashionable to discuss personal physiology in public. (Witness the spectacle of G. B. S. publicly disclaiming his sexual impotence in reply to some rubbish written by Frank Harris.) There has been quite enough gossip about Lawrence and his sexual unrest. What interests me is the Sentimental Revival as typified in the man's work.

With that in mind let us turn for a moment to the case of *Lady Chatterley's Lover, or John Thomas and Lady Jane*, a tale 'tender and phallic' as its author claimed. 'Tender' is good. For the young people who pored over their smuggled copies of the unexpurgated version were treated to a dose of good old-fashioned sentiment which was none the less sentiment because it was applied to the exact opposite of the Victorian ideal. Lawrence was quite as sentimental about John Thomas as Tennyson was about Sir Galahad. It is a considerable crime against humanity to encourage illusions

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

in the young. The Victorians had encouraged illusions about Pure Married Love, illusions which were bound to bring about the most miserable disenchantments. Lawrence encouraged absurd illusions about Pure Unmarried Phallicism, which were equally certain to evoke disappointment. Lawrence, parading his Facts of Life, only distributed rather dangerous fictions and the realistic parent would be well advised to keep *Lady Chatterley's Lover* out of the house, not for any puritanical reasons, but simply because it is likely to arouse in the innocent great expectations of what may turn out to be a quite trivial event. I have in mind the young lady who said 'Is that all?'

Lawrence, of course, took his phallic crusade with immense seriousness, which suggests that he terribly lacked a sense of humour and proportion. 'I believe in the phallic consciousness as against the irritable cerebral consciousness we're afflicted with; and anybody who calls my novel a dirty sexual novel is a liar. It's not even a sexual novel; it's phallic. Sex is a thing that exists in the head, its reactions are cerebral and its processes mental, whereas the phallic reality is warm and spontaneous.' This to Mr. Curtis-Brown. (Letters, p. 709.)

## BROTHER LAWRENCE

And more in the same style, to others. Well, I am not calling the book dirty. I am merely alluding to the sentimental romanticism, which is inherent in all this chatter about a phallic consciousness. Lawrence's Romance of the Phallus is just the Victorian Romance of Purity turned inside out and no less stupid or cloying on that account.

One can see the same process working in other directions. It was the poetic tradition to write ecstatically about certain types of bird and animal, skylarks and lambs and so on. Lawrence turned round and let himself go on the glory of the less popular and superficially repulsive creatures, the snakes and the weasels. He could be a very considerable poet, although he passed for publication some intolerable drivel, and he was lyrical about snakes to some purpose. Perhaps we may regard Lawrence as a figure of romantic chivalry who went about looking for the despised and rejected in order to be their champion. There was an official distaste for nudism in art. Poor old nudism! The chivalric Lawrence thought he must be doing something about it and set to work composing what the police immediately deemed to be 'feelthy pectures'. Of course they were not filthy; they

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

were merely amateurish and incompetent. But it was a romantic gesture to rescue the imprisoned beauty of the Nude. And so with sex in general. These wretched Edwardians had gone and kidnapped the Sleeping Beauty and turned her into a clinical case. In their laboratory they had carved the lady up in order to write learnedly about glands and hormones. All the mystical sentimentalist in Lawrence rebelled against this insult to Woman. Not that he wanted to restore the chaste Victorian raptures of a 'lyric love, half angel and half bird'. His job was to muddle up Free Love with Divine Sanction and, as has been already observed, he had a prodigious vein of biblical spouting with which to do the job. On this theme the reader is recommended to a paper called *The Crown*, early Lawrence since it was originally written in 1915 when John Middleton Murry said 'Let us do something'. So *The Crown* was contributed to a paper called *The Signature*; Lawrence reprinted it in 1925 in a volume called *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, adding that this paper 'says what I still believe'. It is giddy stuff, indicating that Lawrence could have beaten Athanasius at his own game.

## BROTHER LAWRENCE

‘The Beginning is-not, nor the eternity which lies behind us, save in part. Partial also is the eternity which lies in front. But that which is not partial, but whole, that which is not relative, but absolute, is the clash of the two into one, the foam of being thrown up into consummation.’

After a while this essay becomes an immense outpouring of semi-religious amorism, a prolonged emotional wallowing.

‘I can become one with God, consummated into eternity, by taking the road down the senses into the utter darkness of power, till I am one with the darkness of initial power, beyond knowledge of any opposite.

‘It is thus, seeking consummation in the utter darkness, that I come to the woman in desire. She is the doorway, she is the gate to the dark eternity of power, the creator’s power. When I put my hand on her, my heart beats with a passion of fear and ecstasy, for I touch my own passing away, my own ceasing-to-be, I apprehend my own consummation . . . in a darkness which obliterates me in its infinity. My veins

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

rock as if they were being destroyed, the blood takes fire on the edge of oblivion, and beats backward and forward. I resist, yet I am compelled; the woman resists, yet she is compelled. And we are the relative parts dominated by the strange compulsion of the absolute.'

On the whole I prefer the laboratory stuff about glands and hormones to these religious raptures, which Lawrence could go on reeling off, page after sticky page. But an unromantic generation, starved of its natural outlet for sentimentality, swallowed Lawrence as its parents had swallowed Shaw. It was a pleasant change to get away from the drab facts of drabbing, as exposed in the Leicester Square school of fiction, and from the sad and psychic wenching attributed to the attic and the cellarge of art-infested Bloomsbury mansions. How jolly, by way of a change, for the lecherous young to discover that they became 'unified with God, consummated into eternity, by taking the road down the senses'. Lawrence, at any rate, would have nothing dingy about his *Abode of Love*. He illumined the *Facts of Life* as, in Mr. Chesterton's opinion, medieval romance illumined

## BROTHER LAWRENCE

the manifestations of love. The results of 'taking the road down the senses' are as follows:

'Shock after shock of ecstasy and the anguish of ecstasy, death after death of trespass into the unknown, till I fall down into the flame, I lapse into the intolerable flame, a pallid shadow I am transfused into the flux of unendurable darkness, and am gone. No spark nor vestige remains within the supreme dark flow of the flame, I am contributed again to the immortal source. I am with the dark Almighty of the beginning.

'Till, new-created, I am thrown forth again on the shore of creation, warm and lustrous, goodly, new-born from the darkness out of which all time has issued.

'And then, new-born on the knees of darkness, new-issued from the womb of creation, I open my eyes to the light and know the goal, the end, the light which stands over the end of the journey, the everlasting day, the oneness of the spirit.'

So Lawrence told young people how to become



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

'one with God' by becoming one with the other sex and they appear to have liked his recipe. We have returned to the medieval 'Saints of Cupid'. Ostensibly he was smashing up the Shavian realism about the Life Force; in fact he was fiddling a romantic tune on the old, old strings of sensuality.

## CHAPTER VI

### BELLY AND BRAIN

THE next aspect of Lawrentian sentimentality, which demands some critical attention, was his strong distaste for the mind. He entertained a curious conviction that what was wrong with humanity was the head-piece. Not the wrong use of the brain; but the brain itself. The idea of cerebration revolted him. Grey matter! How dreary, as bad as Manchester's staple of grey cloth or England's grey skies. Let us, instead, have something with a dash of pink in it. Let us make thought 'a wild, weird, fleshly thing'. That would be much more romantic. Let us dethrone this tedious cerebellum and set human consciousness in livelier spots. I have already quoted the ascription of a consciousness deeper than any mental quality to the genital organs; on this charming theory *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was composed. At

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

other times the ingenious Lawrence was inclined to favour the belly as the seat of wisdom. When he saw the Mexican Indian doing his ceremonial stuff, he was entranced. For here was a total escape from the repellent sovereignty of reason. 'Face lifted and sightless, eyes half closed and visionless, mouth open and speechless, the sounds arise in the chest, from the consciousness in the abdomen.' A year or two later the seat of consciousness was to move an inch or two lower.

The abdomen appeared to have an extraordinary fascination for Lawrence and when the time comes for a D. H. Lawrence Concordance, the words abdomen and belly will occupy pages of quotation. Sometimes he merely pondered upon the beauty of bellies, as when he discovered the stomachs of women to be like hard, unripe gooseberries; on other occasions he revered the gastric region as the centre of human power, the seat of consciousness, the throne of understanding. If you had asked Lawrence just why the belly was so much mightier than the brain, it is difficult to see what reply could have been given. But Romance, particularly when it has gone running after Mumbo-Jumbo and the Noble Savage, can hardly

## BELLY AND BRAIN

be expected to deal in anything so prosaic as replies. Lawrence might have faced one, like his pet Indians, with 'mouth open and speechless', the sounds arising in his chest from the consciousness in his abdomen. But I fear that would not have satisfied me, whose reverence for the Great God Gaster is insufficiently developed. But Mr. R. L. Megroz, who wrote about Lawrence as 'the most powerful prophet of his age' in the volume on *The Post-Victorians*, carefully explained that 'of course it is just this creative tension induced by the two mental opposites of the controlling, rationalising intellect and the deep, savage fury of the poet's sub-conscious demon, which places Lawrence among the great ones of our literature'.

Mr. Megroz is apparently one of our Savage Romantics. For in this article he talks about 'a primitive paradise in which the individual was not conscious of separateness'. As Mr. Wyndham Lewis pointed out in his *Pale Face* a kind of feverish communism accompanies all this cult of belly-consciousness. Hatred of an individual existence is deep in this combined worship of the group and the guts. He quotes Lawrence again on the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

Indians: 'There is no individual, isolated experience. It is an experience of the blood-stream, not of the mind or spirit.' (Note that this mercurial thing, consciousness, has now passed from the phallus and the belly to the arteries.) 'It is the dark blood falling back from the mind, from sight and speech and knowing, back to the central source where is rest and unspeakable renewal.' Back from the mind, the loathly, intolerable brain. That was Lawrence's dream of perfection. But also there must be no separate personality. All boys together – and all bellies too. What a creed for 'the most powerful prophet of his age'! And what a comment on the age!

Lawrence's psychology is a kind of Freudian re-hash of the crude Elizabethan notion of 'humours', according to which earth, air, fire and water were represented in the human body by black bile, blood, bile, and phlegm. A man's character was determined by his possession of too much or too little of any of these elements. Here was the basis of a gastric behaviourism which Lawrence further expanded by carrying his physiological assumptions a little lower down. It was King Lear's opinion that:

## BELLY AND BRAIN

'Down to the girdle do the gods inherit,  
The rest is all the fiend's.'

'The rest' was all that mattered most to Lawrence. Here lay 'unspeakable renewal' for the consciousness that had been so cruelly starved and oppressed by 'sight and speech and knowing'.

It may naturally puzzle many people that this boosting of animalism, which you may wrap up if you choose in polite verbosity about the fury of the poet's sub-conscious demon, should have been received with anything but hearty and irreverent laughter. But it coincided with a reaction against rationalism. The Liberal Democratic idea, based on the supposed existence of individuals who would choose their destiny according to the dictates of reason, had been shattered by the War, for which it was not responsible, and was inadequate to the reconstruction of a tormented and chaotic world. Government by consent and by debate, counting heads to avoid breaking them, freedom of speech and of opinion were Liberal notions on which the common man could no longer rely. The cosmic mess had gone beyond the control of Parliaments and General Elections. One could reason about the remedies but reason,

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

as tardily expressed through the Parliamentary machine, could not keep pace with the problems which unreason had created. Hence there was a change towards Political Romanticism, with the Hero as Dictator, escaping from the prison-cell or the blacksmith's forge to be the Saviour of the People. Short cuts replaced long speeches and heads were now broken to avoid counting them. It is worth noticing that revolutionary theory has always had its romantic aspects. Before the War the French Syndicalists had toyed with Bergsonian notions of 'Elan Vital' and with Sorel's 'Myth of a General Strike'. The creation of a Revolutionary Mythology was also deemed essential in Russia where the Dead Hero (Lenin) was mummified like any Pharaoh and left in pickle as a public spectacle. The old churches might be denounced and closed; but there was a new Russian Church of Communism and this Church has never scrupled to make emotional, even hysterical, appeals to the mass consciousness, using all the arts of theatre, kinema, and music to intensify the proletarian worship of the Red leaders, the Saints of Communism. Elsewhere emotional hero-worship abounded. One by one the

## BELLY AND BRAIN

Parliaments disappeared and the Mussolinis and the Hitlers arrived. Your Dictator might be in himself an acutely reasoning person, who calculated cause and effect with an adroit use of the brain-pan. But his method was always to discourage such usage in others, preferring to dismiss with violence the remnants of the Liberal idea (i.e. belief in reason) and to create romantic myths of the Nation with its Sacred Egoism or of the Aryan with his Invincible Teutonic Spirit. Flags and symbols, always the stock-in-trade of Romance, were freely employed and given the status of the sacrosanct.

Consequently all those who had professed themselves to be servants of the mind came in for the hottest persecution. When some All-Highest, surrounded by his gangs of bravos in shirtings coloured by their politics, took the trouble to persecute aged lecturers on history or metaphysics, it seemed at first that they were using a steam-roller to crack a walnut. But there was a kind of wild sagacity in these assaults on scholarship. For scholarship represented, perhaps feebly, perhaps pedantically, the belief in the mind; it was, by intention if not always in fact,



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

rational and realistic. In short, it was exactly what Political Romanticism could not safely tolerate. Scholarship aims at stripping words of their pretences and at discovering the reality for which words stand. Romanticism thrives on pretences and on word-symbols, which simultaneously inflame and befog the mind. It is as fond of a slogan as of a flag. Moreover, the Dictatorships had to work upon mass-emotion. Individualism, with its insistence upon the rights of the separate man to use the reasoning power of the separate brain, had to be 'liquefied', to use the charming Bolshevik phrase for killing or imprisoning anyone with whom you don't agree. What was required was the subjection of the European citizen to the state of mindless, eyeless, hysterical, mass-consciousness which D. H. Lawrence so approved when he discovered it in the ceremonial prancings and caterwaulings of the Mexican Indian. The Hero as Dictator is naturally sympathetic to a philosophy which wipes out the mind and puts the seat of consciousness in the blood-stream or the belly.

It is a commonplace that the person most easy to deceive is the recipient of a higher education which has failed to be sufficiently high. The

## BELLY AND BRAIN

schooling system of Europe and America had just reached the stage at which it was creating the pseudo-intellectual in very considerable numbers. This type had learned to use long words and it was extremely partial to regarding as new and vital and immensely exciting any ideas which were as old as the hills or totally discredited by intelligence. The condition of accepting those ideas was their arrival in a mist of pretentious terminology. This was carefully supplied by the communists, with their jargon about bourgeois and proletarian ideology, and by the Psychoanalysts with their heavy Latin disguises for ordinary states of consciousness and desire. Thus the semi-schooled simpleton, who might have been a little shocked if a Communist announced that he had just shot another old farmer, was deeply impressed by the news that some more bourgeois ideology had been liquefied. The same person might also have been disgusted if the Psychoanalyst had told him that he was full of incestuous lusts, but he could be mightily pleased by the ascription to his ego of a complex fetched out of the lexicon. He not only believed; he repeated. The one thing he would not do, because of his

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

mental laziness or incompetence, was to analyse the analyst and to ask the Herr Doktor what exactly all this stuff meant and what evidence he had for assuming it to be true.

The nineteen-twenties, accordingly, provided exactly the right sounding-board for D. H. Lawrence. There was a widespread anti-rational reaction; there was a growing multitude of people who loved to use long words without trying to understand them; there was a fairly general atmosphere of hysteria consequent upon the War and the chaotic conditions of the post-war civilisations. The orgy of violence caused a severe breach of cultural and intellectual traditions. The White Man was scarcely to be seen at his best. Therefore a cult of the Splendid Savage might be made to fill the literary churches once again. The Liberal Democratic vision of a rational and peaceful society had been badly knocked about. Therefore the dream of an illiberal and aristocratic society might be marketed with success. Lawrence rose to both these opportunities. He had not a political idea in his head (or should one say abdomen?) but he was ready to rave about the beauties of aristocracy in an essay which is a masterpiece of verbal muddle

## BELLY AND BRAIN

with the usual biblical spouting and the inevitable dose of the belly-cult thrown in.

‘He who has the sun in his face, in his body, he is the pure aristocrat. He who has the sun in his breast and the moon in his belly, he is the first, the aristocrat of aristocrats, supreme in the aristocracy of life.’

‘More life,’ he screamed. ‘Not more safe cabbages or meaningless masses of people.’

Then he got the sun in his eyes and screamed again:

‘Bah! Enough of the squalor of democratic humanity. It is time to begin to recognise the aristocracy of the sun. The children of the sun shall be lords of the earth.

‘There will form a new aristocracy, irrespective of nationality, of men who have reached the sun. Men of the sun, whether Chinese or Hottentot, or Nordic, or Hindu, or Esquimo, if they touch the sun in the heavens, are lords of the earth. And together they will form the aristocracy of the world. And in the coming

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

era they will rule the world; a confraternity of the living sun, making the embers of financial internationalism and industrial internationalism pale upon the hearth of the earth.'

What facile drivel it all is, page after page about the sun being the Holy Ghost and Cæsar being a sun-man. Lawrence, when he was launched on this kind of flood, was an impossible jackass. Fortunately he had other species of flood. In his study of *Modern English Fiction* Mr. Gerald Bullett brilliantly summarised the success and the failure of Lawrence.

'Mr. D. H. Lawrence is a dog with one superlative trick. He can communicate physical sensations with a vividness no other writer can equal, and this power entitles him to recognition as a man of indubitable though narrow genius. He can communicate physical sensations, and he is master of the dark region that exists somewhere between thought and feeling. . . .

'But by setting up to be a prophet, by flaunting his didactic purpose in our faces, Mr.

## BELLY AND BRAIN

Lawrence forces us to examine his doctrine instead of enjoying his art. Mr. Lawrence's prose, which (despite his insensitiveness to rhythm) has in its day produced some marvellous effects, has recently gone from good to bad and from bad to worse; his animal-worship is in danger of becoming ridiculous; and the dark gods he has invoked are playing the very devil with his style.'

Mr. Bullett further combats the definition of Lawrence as a barbarian with a streak of genius by pointing out that barbarians do not write books in praise of barbarism. Lawrence, slobbering over the demonic power of a horse (not the muscular beauty which merits praise) or the sightless, senseless ecstasy of orgiastic savages, cuts a worse than ridiculous figure just because he really had intelligence enough to possess some powers of self-criticism. That he should ever have sent to the printer all this tosh about the Aristocrat with the sun in his breast and the moon in his belly is bad enough, but that he should then be announced as the greatest prophet of his age is piffle's crown of piffle. But, as I have endeavoured to show, he campaigned

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

against reason at the right moment. Reason was so much out of favour that the puny little quibblings of the Italian dramatist, Pirandello, were solemnly accepted as a proof of a powerful mind, although they were only the small change of the fallacies combated in the dialogues of Plato and the A B C of any course in logic and metaphysics. I am not saying that Pirandello was no dramatist, just as I am not saying that Lawrence was no novelist. What was appalling was the general ignorance which permitted such stuff in both cases to be taken as profound contributions to the thought of the age. A prophet is a person with a message which, to be of any value, must be novel and coherent. Lawrence was neither novel nor coherent. Much of his yelping was simply verbose reiteration of Blake's apothegms; if it be original to place the seat of consciousness in the belly or lower, he is entitled to such fame as that discovery may bring. That he really had no settled opinions may be deduced from the huge volume of letters, in which he is to be found in a state of continual self-contradiction. But his neo-barbarism suited a period in which traditional civilisation was out of favour; his instinctivism suited people who wanted

## BELLY AND BRAIN

some quasi-philosophic justification for having a good time and lacked the courage to indulge themselves without a little highbrow support. If the world recovers its belief in reason, there will be considerable surprise that Lawrence was ever accepted as a prophet. Not all his work will be committed to the flames, but there will be little audience for the belly-worship and for the beating of Lawrentian tom-toms over the consciousness secreted in the blood-stream and in other places less commonly discussed in public.



## CHAPTER VII

### CALIBAN

FROM the dual worship of Tom-Tom and Tum-Tum professed by D. H. Lawrence in his Indo-American raptures and acclaimed, like his other raptures, by Mr. Lawrence's Young Ladies, it is a small step to the more general cult of Caliban. This cult is commonly commended by owners of the loftiest brow and most advanced opinions, as is only natural in a period which prefers impulse to intelligence and can be persuaded to admire anything which affronts the canons of a civilised tradition. The efforts to find glory in the contortions and cacophonies of a coon who knows the market-value of King Congo's music seem to me essentially flame-worthy. Not long ago a friend of mine, renowned for his Elizabethan scholarship, advised me to attend one of these sessions with Caliban and expressed his

## CALIBAN

further opinion that the show was really 'demonic'. Accordingly, being ever curious about all manifestations of culture, I visited his music-hall, where a negro musician was the star attraction. The negro was equipped with what Shakespeare called 'powerful brass' and his posse of coloured minstrels, equally armed, could be relied upon to make the most reluctant welkin ring. If 'musician' was here a courtesy title, 'attraction' certainly was not. It was immediately obvious that the fellow was a box-office 'wow', 'riot', and 'smash-hit' according to the lingo of the trade. The moment he arrived on the stage he was acclaimed not so much like an old friend as like a demi-god. Even the 'demi' might be dropped. A darkie Dionysiac, waving his trumpet as a thyrsus, called – or rather leered and grunted – to a thousand corybants equally collected from Chelsea and from Camden Town. There are no class distinctions in this cult. Your address does not matter, so long as you are seized with the frenzy of black Bacchus. I must admit that a few, like myself, failed to endure the entire curriculum of Primitive Art and preferred to absent themselves from such felicity awhile. But the majority were of the faith, hot-gospellers.

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

It was a sultry night of mid-summer and all perspired in their ecstasy, none more so than the master of the trumpeting ceremonies, as he invoked his damp, dark orchestra to ever more furious projection of their 'hot numbers'.

Whenever he announced that he and his 'boys' would 'swing' this or that ditty the worshippers cheered in advance; when the ditty had been 'swung' they cheered with the same frenzy which 'the boys' had put into the swinging process. The response of a white audience in 1933 to the convulsive antics and brayings on the stage was really terrifying. Jazz was supposed to be a post-war craze, the joy-scream of humanity released from torment. It is true that the fashions of the ball-room have considerably changed since the first incursions of the negro in 'full swing'. There was a Viennese revival, but it made no serious inroad on the popularity of the barbaric clatter; we have passed through a colour-scheme of cacophony from Blues to Black Bottoms and still there is no escape. The thing goes on and, as I write, I read that the composers of dance-tunes have been solemnly (but probably vainly) passing resolutions against the abominable handling of their airs in

## CALIBAN

Tin Pan Alley and the Charing Cross Road. They may try to compose with civility; they may create a melody for Western ears. But when the orchestras have got hold of their work, they submit it to the 'gingering' talent of saxophone-soloists and beaters of the Tom-Tom until there is nothing left of the original air; there are only jungle screams and African percussions. It is more than twenty years since the arrival of 'The Turkey Trot' and 'Alexander's Rag-time Band', more than twenty years since I attended my first demonstration of 'Hot Numbers' in the Bedford Music Hall. The thing has changed in detail, but it has not altered in the nature of its appeal. What is significant is that it has gained status and repute. One is recommended to a Caliban Carnival on the highest authority. 'Definitely demonic, my dear.' Congo screams and Chelsea applauds.

But let me return to the Dark Dionysos. His leadership of 'the boys' took the form of violent physical contortions, grotesque leers, streams of perspiration, and the use of a strange, growling voice that brought him far closer to the Hairy Ape than to any of God's Chillun. He seemed to take

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

a deliberate delight in the shedding of any remnants of human dignity and in simulating the crouching and roaring of some jungle monster. He was a mixture of King Kong and the D. H. Lawrence Indian. Did not Lawrence rave over the 'strange clapping, crowing, gurgling sounds in an unseizable subtle rhythm, the rhythm of the heart in her throes'? Our star-attraction obviously had none of the detested grey-matter in the detested brain; he was fulfilling all the requisites of Lawrentian anatomy; his consciousness was obviously in the abdomen or lower and the dark blood, which made Lawrence feel so good when it fell back 'from sight and speech and knowing to the great central source' was patently doing its stuff according to the Lawrentian canons of sanguinary behaviour. As I watched this performance I began, for the first time in my life, to understand the feelings of an American Southerner, whose racial antipathies had previously seemed so childish and perverse. I fled the building reflecting on the civilised voice that had implored me not to miss the spectacle. As I left, the white audience had become almost as demonic in its applause as the fellow on the stage, who was still wiping away

## CALIBAN

streams of sweat and suggesting new 'hot numbers' for the swinging process. It was evidently a great treat from which I was so unsympathetically departing.

It is possible surely to resent this kind of thing without attaching oneself to the White Snobbery of the Pukka Sahib. To censure white prostration before black corybants is not to deal in senseless colour-bars; Mr. Robeson can act with the fairest of the fair and nothing will shock me save, in some probability, the incompetence of the fair when set beside Mr. Robeson's authentic power. Constantine, the black magic of West Indian cricket, is most welcome at Lord's and I was immensely amused when, after the West Indians had defeated the gentry of the M.C.C., a chorus of ecstatic coons stampeded in front of the Pavilion, where the Forsytes cluster behind the white, exclusive rails, and screamed their pleasure to the considerable embarrassment of old Jolyon or whoever it is that has succeeded to his august pew in this temple of the solemn sahibs. But, because one is, or is endeavouring to be, a good cosmopolite, that is no excuse for surrendering the standards of Western civilisation to those of another which

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

may fairly be called a lower. Is it snobbishness to assume that a culture directed by reason and exercising a discipline of thought and feeling has greater value than the anarchic, mindless emotionalism of the jungle and the swamp? It is true that the impact of a simple Christianity on the hard-driven nigger of the plantation produced some exquisite effects; black and white here merged in pathos that had beauty. But it is, even at its best, the pathos of a forlorn child and the response to it has always contained something of patronage. The success of *Green Pastures* mirrored a smile at the quaintness of the coon; the American writers who found their heaven in Harlem may have denied condescension but were actually exploiting it.

But all this, whether good or bad, is utterly different from the grovelling worship of the negro when he himself is grovelling before the oldest of his idols and doing it for money in an English music-hall. To object to Caliban in this guise it not to accept the racial ethics of the 'poor white' in Alabama, or to ask for tar, feathers, rope and gun as the sanctions of a racial prejudice. I do not mind who makes these beastly noises and

## CALIBAN

cuts these sub-human capers; his skin can be damask, his blood-stream may gush from the pure fountains of the Vere de Vere. It is the noise and the capers that disgust. Though the noise be propelled at me with all the Scottish respectability of Sir John Reith behind it and all the decorous authority of the B.B.C. it is none the less a beastly and barbaric noise. The music-hall spectacle of orgiastic contortions to emphasise the tempo of the racket naturally intensifies exasperation. The nuisance becomes worse still when some intellectual cries up this kind of entertainment by calling it 'demonic'. Demonic it undoubtedly is; so, I suppose, are rape, scalping, witch-hunting, and human sacrifice.

It was plain, however, that this barbaric exhibition, like many others of its kind, met some permanent craving of the audience. When we talk of Western civilisation, there is no need to deceive ourselves that the thing has deep roots. Our England of to-day is only distant by a few generations from an England whose brutalities now seem incredible, an England which flocked to spectacles of public execution, which virtually enslaved children to the factory and the mine, which staged



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

animal conflicts, one lion against two dogs and so forth, sufficiently gory to have pleased a Roman mob, whose standard in these pleasures was admittedly high. Go back a little further and you find the delicious spectacle of women publicly flogged and burned to death. Of Barbara Spencer, whose crime was coining and whose fate was death (1721), the *Newgate Calendar* observes:

‘While under sentence of death she behaved in the most indecent and turbulent manner; nor could she be convinced that she had been guilty of any crime in making a few shillings. She, was for some time very impatient under the idea of her approaching dissolution, and particularly shocked at the thought of being burnt; but, at the place of execution, she seemed willing to exercise herself in devotion, but was much interrupted by the mob throwing stones and dirt at her.’

But it was Barbara whose conduct shocked the writer as indecent and turbulent!

Condemnation to the gallows did not in that century mean death only; the body was quartered

## CALIBAN

and eviscerated to gratify the public appetite for revenge on malefactors. When Lawrence, Earl Ferrers was 'launched into eternity' on May 5th, 1760, the coffin was raised up 'with the greatest decency' to receive the body and then,

'A large incision was made from the neck to the bottom of the breast, and another across the throat; the lower part of the belly was laid open, and the bowels taken away. It was afterwards publicly exposed to view in a room up one pair of stairs at the Hall; and on the evening of Thursday, the 8th of May, it was delivered to his friends for interment.'

So nice for Caliban. Had not the decencies been observed? Turn back a little further still and we realise that Shakespeare, when he walked from his lodgings to his work, crossed a bridge hung with the rotting heads of human beings; that torture was still a common implement of state; that the Elizabethans, who seem so rarely sensitive to every breath and motion of beauty, were living in a world of grossness and cruelty almost unimaginable to a civilised Englishman of to-day.

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

For ourselves, we need not boast. We know that when there is war the brute emerges horribly enough among the home folk, that people who would not smack a naughty child talk glibly about exterminating whole nations. We know that, when there is a revolutionary upthrust, white civilisation can collapse into savagery without stint. We English think ourselves a very decent and reasonable lot, but one may reasonably wonder what would happen if there were a Fascist-Communist conflict in our country which did really get beyond the stage of modest buffetings in Hyde Park and achieved the status of a civil war. Would that nice young man with whom we played golf the other day emerge as a flagellant, turning unofficial cells to torture-houses? We certainly walked along that cliff-edge of the general strike in a way that was immensely creditable to our national balance, but if the thing were to happen again who could be certain of a similar containment? But what has all this, it may be asked to do with a coon-show in a music-hall? Much, for my point is that there are moments when man rebels against his own achievement of self-discipline and wants to break loose and wallow. The

## CALIBAN

victory, as we have seen, over mere brutishness is recent, slight, and perhaps impermanent. 'The unconscious self,' says the Freudian, 'is in constant revolt against disciplinary repression and finds in war and other forms of anarchy a refuge from the tyranny of ideals.' Amid the barbaric rites of a negro orchestra, specially hotted up, this poor refugee certainly may discover an anarchy of sound and feeling. But what a contemptible state of mind the Freudian postulates! Civilisation, with its decencies and disciplines, is boring; therefore, instead of putting a curb on our impulse to be barbaric, we may wallow in blood and sand. Are we weaklings without a will? Are we never to take a firm hand with our baser selves?

There is far more of that Calibanic wallowing than most people suspect. The popular word 'thrill', which is such a darling of the caption-writer and appears in large letters of flame over so many films and plays, may seem harmless enough. But it covers, very often, a gratification of sadistic impulses and a pandering to sheer bestiality of taste. At a town where I was on holiday recently there was a man who used to sprinkle his body with some inflammable stuff, set alight to it, and

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

dive into the sea, thus flaming, from the pier-head, just reaching the water in time to escape damage. Here was a specimen of Homo Sapiens in process of earning his living. What real reason could there be for the popularity of such a senseless display except the unadmitted hope that there would be an accident and that the spectators would carry home to their lodgings a slight smell of roast human? The dive from the pier-head was in itself no great feat; a dozen amateurs did it daily. Why should the flames fascinate sufficiently to earn the man a living unless the people were really waiting for him to suffer injury? It is the same with most of the much trumpeted 'thrills', reckless stunts in the air, motor-racing at preposterous speeds, and the strident arena of the Dirt Track. So with our circuses featuring the trainer in the lions' cage and our music-halls with their dangerous aerial gymnastics. They are a modern substitute for the old, more frankly horrible pleasures of the arena.

In the music-hall the public do not specially applaud feats of high gymnastic virtuosity or athletic grace, if these are not dangerous. One cause of that may be ignorance of gymnastic technique; the average person in the auditorium does

## CALIBAN

not realise that some of the feats that do not look impressive are immensely difficult and could not even be approached by the ordinary gymn-instructor. But there is obviously more in it than that. The public attention is not fully seized and held until the performer begins to risk his or her life. I detest these spectacles myself, but I am plainly in a minority. It evidently gives the audience great satisfaction to sit beside the possibility of a fatal disaster. One slip may mean a broken neck. So they get their 'thrill', even though the slip is not made, the neck not broken. This is less sadistic than an arena-combat between Christian and lion or bull and toreador, where the public are guaranteed the blissful certainty of bloodshed. But the principle of pleasure is the same and it is a loathly one. The motor bicycle racing on Dirt Tracks, with its violent skidding round the corners and its frequency of crashes, caters more directly for the sadistic instinct. Hypocrisy is, to some extent, a sign of improvement in taste and ethics. If people are ashamed to admit their blood-lust and talk about 'thrills' instead, they may be deemed to have improved upon the crowds whose pleasure lay in watching women flogged and burned and bodies

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

drawn and quartered. But it is ridiculous to pretend that we have ceased to gratify the public itch to see limbs broken and to watch blood flow. Large numbers of people will get up early in order to loiter outside a prison at the time of an invisible execution. Even to be near that horror is a delight.

The amount of sadism that passes through the barriers of film censorship is considerable. Caliban loves to see the monster and the woman (e.g. King Kong) and the titles and sub-titles of popular pictures are continually using the words 'Primitive' to rouse expectations of violent lust. The Tarzans and the Kongs remain best-sellers; the modern thrill-hunter may be denied the Roman Arena and the Rape of the Sabine Women, which, had Hollywood existed in those days, would certainly have been the most powerful collector of the people's copper. But the Rape of the Platinum Blondes, if not in act depicted, is continually hinted. Spectacles of slaughter are also extremely popular. In October, 1933, there was shown at the New Gallery Cinema in London, an affair called 'The World's Greatest Thrills'. Here is what Mr. Ivor Montagu wrote about it in a criticism in *The Week-End Review*. (Mr. MacNamee, it should be

## CALIBAN

explained, is an 'ace radio announcer' who was apparently attached to this film just in case the Main Street nit-wits should not understand how jolly and bloody it all sure was.)

'What is the matter upon the screen? It is a short film, made by Universal, and<sup>1</sup> purporting to glorify the news reel cameraman – the film reported. It does not need Mr. MacNamee to tell us a hundred and one times over in unvaryingly bated breathlessness that – gee, folks, the man's a hero, why, look at that, the boys sure do run some risks, everywhere there's danger, there they have to go *et ad infinitum*. The pictures themselves show it. Universal has assembled the most marvellous collection of news reel material ever put into a two-reeler. The *pièce de résistance* is the sinking of the *Blucher*. Men being drowned in hundreds, blown up, shattered, burnt, run over, trampled, dropped from a height, smothered in hurricanes, everything for every taste. As horror piles on horror we become swept up by the holocaust, and human life begins to forfeit all value in what is perhaps not an edifying but at least an



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

instructive way. A remarkable and uncommon film.'

Uncommon? Surely not uncommon enough. No wretched singletons in this sanguinary deal, but corpses by the gross, a very carnival of blood and guts. As the American hotel-owner said when they showed him a good sunset, 'Now that's what I call Service.'

The pleasures of Caliban are not limited to the public who pay a shilling for their thrills. The quality still patronise the ring and people who know nothing whatever about boxing will produce large sums of money to have an evening of close contiguity to bloodshed. They also have their hunting and it is still one of the peculiar practices of the English gentry to smear the faces of children with the blood of a new-killed fox, a fact worth remembering when we meditate upon the extent to which civilisation has penetrated the hide of the Average Sporting Person. The pursuit and slaughter of stags makes a more frequent and poignant appeal to the humanitarian conscience than does the chivvyng of foxes, because deer are naturally sympathetic to the eye;

## CALIBAN

also they are themselves innocent of blood, preferring the farmer's crops to the farmer's chickens. But it is not obvious that the deer suffers more from prolonged pursuit and violent dismemberment than does the fox or the hare; the opposition to hunting must be general to be logical. Its defence, likewise, must be frank to be tolerable. Let the hunter openly proclaim that this is his line of country, that he knows the game is cruel and that he puts his pleasure before the animal's pain. Then we know where we are. Let him not nauseate us with rubbish about safeguarding the breed of horses or saving the farmer from the predatory fox, when everybody knows that foxes are specially preserved in order to provide 'sport'. The English habit of being extremely sentimental about some animals, such as the dog and the horse, and ruthlessly brutal to others, usefully scheduled as 'game', reveals a characteristic spirit of compromise. The English gentleman makes terms with his sadistic impulse, as it were Milord negotiating with Caliban. So far, says the former, and no further. He has abandoned the ancestral pleasures of the bear-pit and the cock-fight. Therefore he reserves the deer, the fox, and the hare. He is

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

no Corinthian to enjoy the long orgy of bare-fisted fights. But he maintains the right to spend ten pounds on watching a glove-fight which probably lasts three minutes, a questionable bargain, however great the addiction to spectacles of violence.

The Englishman has, on the whole, a strong objection to the Spanish bull-ring. But there is an intellectuals' cult of this business, stimulated by the American author, Mr. Ernest Hemingway. For Mr. Hemingway's ability to describe episodes, as for D. H. Lawrence's, I have profound admiration. But for his taste and judgment I have little. His idealisation of hairy he-men engaged upon various species of assault and battery becomes infinitely tiresome; it is the romanticism of the schoolboy equipped with a prose-style which deserves an adult theme. As Mr. Wyndham Lewis in his admirable survey of these bull-roarers of the Blood-and-Guts School quietly observes

'if you are not so romantically inclined you will get tired of such a physical infatuation, and the insatiable taste for violence – for *sangre y arena*, for blood and sand, blood and iron, and all the other accompaniments of the profuse discharge

## CALIBAN

of human blood. It is possible to feel that the blood-stream, perforations through which it pours out, things that make it beat and throb hotly, and so on, are not the only subjects of interest.

‘You may even go further than that, and feel that our literature to-day is becoming a sort of mortuary games; more and more a Roman brutality is invading our books; so that the communistic fever into which everyone was plunged during the War, especially those who took part in it – the gladiators watched by the politicians and financiers, for whom the War was a sort of immense Circus – is perpetuated in print.’

That is simple truth and it needs restatement in view of the enthusiastic highbrow reception given to the Hemingway rhapsodies on the bull-ring. Once more let it be said that, if a man straightly confess himself a sadist who enjoys the vision of the horses’ entrails, the tortured bull, and the life-adventuring human performer, then we can respect him as an honest opponent of civilisation. But when he puts up a flimsy defence about the beauty of the spectacle and the essential ‘ballet’

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

inherent in the pattern of the bull-fighters' movements, we shall dismiss these special pleaders as disgusting and dishonourable. Mr. Hemingway is professedly a disciple of brutalism and, although he has wittily mocked the nigger cult of Mr. Sherwood Anderson, one of the silliest of the Black Beauty school, he seems to be a straightforward fancier of the arena in its modern forms. But it was surprising to notice the reception given to his work by the intellectuals who, as usual, lacked the intelligence to understand where its real foundation lay, namely in the total denial of that civilisation which has given the intellectuals their chance to emerge and to exist in some state of comfort and of toleration. The hunter who hunts for the good of the fox and the stag, the pedagogue who beats boys because he richly enjoys a violent revenge upon their laziness and impudence and then talks about his painful duty, the spectator of prize-fights who says that he is disgusted by the bloodshed but enjoys 'the noble art', and the bull-fight devotees who pretend that they are going to watch a charming alternative to the Russian ballet, all these are equally detestable. It may certainly be said on behalf of D. H. Lawrence that he never

## CALIBAN

in his life played the hypocrite in this style; nonsense he often talked, but cant never. When he admired the sightless, speechless, mindless orgies of the Indian, he said so at the top of his voice and with the fullness of his devotion. He grew to detest a mental and European culture and he wrote dithyrambs about the 'phallic consciousness'. But he never pretended. He never insisted that he really meant something tame and pretty all the time. He never tried to patch up a sham truce between civility and barbarism. How much more acceptable is his honest avowal of the Primitive than the equivocation of those who tried to keep one foot in the bull-ring and the other in Bloomsbury or Boston.

We have strayed somewhat far from a jazz-band or rather from that particularly ferocious form of jazz-conducting to whose 'demonic' pleasures I had been recommended by an otherwise sensitive person. But the principle governing the popularity of spectacles actually or potentially barbaric and the appetite for a form of noise and demeanour which denied every canon of form, proportion, restraint, and civility was surely the same. It was rebellion against the imposed ideals of contem-

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

porary life; it was the eagerness to break loose and grovel, homesickness for the mud, atavistic animalism. The rebels cannot go as far as they please; there are the laws; there are policemen at the corner of the street. But there can be vicarious satisfaction. If, not being English schoolmasters, we are denied the pleasures of flagellation, the films may offer us considerable recompense with their Roman panoramas and their lively presentation of slaughter on the grand scale. There could be little doubt that what pleased the crowd in the music-hall was the appearance of a man who was behaving like a monkey. The vaudeville public are indeed capricious in their pursuit of metamorphosis. Let a monkey behave like a man – if it be the essence of manhood to wear trousers, drink whisky, and do a card-trick – and they will applaud loudly in their delight. Let a man behave like a monkey – if it be the essence of monkeydom to leer and crouch and grunt – and it will be even more enraptured. It was nothing very dreadful, I admit, in itself, just a silly species of anthropoid debasement; but dreadful in its implications of repressed rebellion against the standards of human dignity. There is no doubt whatever that, if a

## CALIBAN

kinema-owner can proclaim in letters of fire, that he is presenting bloody murder, primitive passion, jungle love, and the whole range of rapacity, he will do rare business in the Western World, where compulsory education has by no means demolished the primitive impulse. A wit once defined the results of our educational system by saying that the mural inscription of a certain rude word was more frequent and lower down than it used to be. But we need not stop at the urchin who practises his spelling and drawing in the public lavatory; even the publishers have a predilection for advertisements which certainly offer the Calibans, Mr., Mrs., Master and Miss, three hundred pages of satisfaction. 'Stark' is here the operative word of allurements.

It can be argued that we are far better off with the substitute for the fact than with the fact itself. It can be said that if we ban pictorial brutality, dangerous spectacles, and the remnant of the Englishman's blood-sports, we shall do more harm than good. These are his escapes from decency and what will he do if escape is forbidden him? If Colonel Blood, assisted by some forty hounds, may no longer chivvy the fox, what will the gallant



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

boy do for his fun save turn the more eagerly upon his fellows? At present, the argument runs, the sadistic impulse is being canalised into channels fairly harmless, except, of course, for the luckless species scheduled as 'game'. They are the involuntary sacrifice demanded by Homo Sapiens, if he is to display some sapience in other directions. Let us glory in a nigger heaven, let us applaud the creole whose chief offering to London, as to Paris, is to dance in a central festoon of bananas; let us gloat over celluloid massacre. Let us do all this lest worse befall. There may be something in it. But, if there is, let us accept it with our eyes open. What I most heartily commit to the flames is the pretence that the furtive satisfactions of the sadist are really the patronage of a noble art. Let us have no more of the revolting bunkum about the ballet-beauty of the bull-ring or the romantic glories of the circus where doped and broken animals perform idiotic tricks. Let us have no more defences of hunting which pretend that the runnable stag is having the time of his life when run. Let us have no more drivelling praise of 'hot numbers' propelled by orgiastic coons on the ground that they are a lovely essay in primitive

## CALIBAN

humanity. Let Caliban proclaim himself and stand up for his appetites. It is when he adds to his pleasures of the arena the sniffing cant of the high-brow that he becomes totally insufferable and his opinions merit nothing but the fire.

## CHAPTER VIII

### NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

#### (I) *The Old Barbarian*

IT is a curious feature of our time that the same attack on educational method is being delivered both from the Right Wing and the Left. By the Right Wing I mean those who have always despised intelligence in general and have particularly objected to any intellectual stimulation of the young. They are very numerous and very obstinate. One of His Majesty's Inspectors of Secondary Schools recently told me that a continual hindrance to the improvement of those Academies for the Daughters of Gentlefolk, which are clustered so thickly round our seaside towns, is the incurable dread of parents lest their daughters should 'get ideas into their heads'. You might have thought that the insertion of ideas into heads was the main

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

purpose of education. But, no. Education, as still understood by very many middle-class parents, means the separation (by authority) of thoughts from minds and any attempt to modernise the curriculum is regarded as dangerous, just because it may cause a few leaks in the dam which the system has so effectively constructed between heads and ideas. Nor need we boast that this barrier has been limited to schools for girls.

The dominant purpose of English Secondary Education has during the last century been ethical rather than intellectual. Ever since Dr. Arnold endeavoured to qualify the appalling barbarism of the big schools, the ruffian-factories of the eighteenth century, cursed alike by Henry Fielding and Doctor Johnson, and to turn his pupils into the embryos of Christian gentlemen, there has been a happy recognition by parents and by society that ethics are a good, safe line. Arnold, of course, endeavoured to make scholars as well as saints, but the notion that imposing a mould of character was an essential part of schooling proved immensely and infectiously attractive to a large number of people. These distrusted scholarship altogether as something likely to swell young heads with the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

ideas that are usually given the red label of 'subversive', which is the polite English for radical and poisonous. Thus the old kind of barbarian, who instinctively loathed education, found himself able to give the new schooling some kind of benison. He approved of games and religion (of a sort) and, if there were more of cricket and Christianity than of book-learning, why then education might not be so bad for the boys after all. These Victorian schools created 'character' and character, for him and for the masters, meant obedience. Children of 'character' did not think for themselves; they did what they were told, said their prayers, took hard knocks, and absorbed a simple ethical tradition of playing the right kind of game in the right kind of way. If they must apply themselves to books, those books would be carefully chosen and edited and the instruction based on them would be rendered harmless.

There had long been in existence a curious tradition of dipping young minds almost exclusively in the civilisation of Greece and Rome. The traditionalists had to accept the tradition, a dangerous one for them, since the behaviour of the Greeks and Romans, whether in divine form on Olympus

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

or in human form in their terrestrial cities, was not at all like that of Little Christian Gentlemen. But a teacher, after all, can work wonders with his subjects and somehow the inmates of Public Schools (or all but the sharp-witted five per cent.) were escorted through the classics without any damaging realisation that the Greek and Roman Gods were all fully qualified for an English prison or that the Greek civilisation was drenched with that homosexual affection which the Public Schools first made inevitable by their barrack-life and then punished as the unforgivable sin when the inevitable happened.

So the system has endured, a system wherein God fulfils himself in many ways, but chiefly through cricket and football.

‘God give us bases to guard and beleaguer  
Games to play out, whether earnest or fun;  
Fights for the fearless and goals for the eager,  
Twenty and thirty and forty years on.’

Thus sang Bowen of Harrow, the organ-voice of middle-class English scholasticism; he believed in ‘the indescribable value of the common English games . . . nothing approaches them in value’. They made character; and they so tired out the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

young that they had no energy left for subversive ideas or Hellenic practices.

I quite admit that there has been some mitigation of the athletic-and-ethical curriculum. Schools which had the most exalted reputations at Lord's Cricket Ground have admitted young headmasters who, with courage beyond praise, have opposed the 'straight-bat' kind of education and have combated the obstinate hatred of ideas still firmly entrenched in the minds of the elder pedagogues. But, when we have made all allowances for the reforms which have followed the secularisation of headmasterships and the appointment of young and intelligent men, can we really claim that the more renowned secondary schools have overcome their detestation of ideas? The evidence, after all, is to be found when these schools are showing themselves off to the parents and, through reported speeches, 'telling the world'.

At the end of June the grander schools are celebrant. The occasion is curious. The learned and studious boys and girls, who used to be known and hated as horrid little 'swots' and still may be so despised, are paraded to receive the rewards of industry. They march onto a platform, there to be

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

presented with calf-bound volumes inscribed in a language that bears some likeness to Latin. The learned are therein described as bearing the palm in this or that branch of study; they bow to the ceremonial donor and depart. The rest of the school, packed in an overcrowded hall, may or may not applaud feebly. If the palm-bearer is also good at games – an unusual occurrence – there is general and prolonged applause. But the general atmosphere is one of natural boredom. All, even the palm-bearers, are looking forward to the afternoon, which will be a half-holiday, with ices and strawberries about. The spectacle of the palm-bearer is not exciting; a few scenes from Molière and the Greek drama, recited by nervous and perspiring childhood, are certainly no relief and drag wearily on through the long, hot morning. Everybody is glad when it is over.

There is one odd feature of these rites, a feature so constant as well as so curious that nobody ever seems to be surprised by it. The prizes are usually distributed to the palm-bearers by a Great Sahib. The Great Sahib is preferably an Old Boy, and he has won great renown by his firm handling of lesser breeds without the law. (If the day's heroine



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

is a Mem-Sahib and an Old Girl, the renown may have been won nearer home by a firm handling of Factory Girls, who graduate by way of Mem-Sahib's Welfare Centres to become Good Wives for Working Men.) Great Sahib is introduced by Head Master as a shining example of Character, and Character, it is further explained, is only created by the Great Public Schools. Sahib then deals benignly with the palm-bearers; he hands out the calf-bound for half an hour or so, and finally makes his speech. In this he announces that he was perpetually bottom of the form, never won a prize in his life, and was not in the least ashamed of being a blockhead. He then goes on to explain that Britain is not made powerful by its palm-bearers with their loads of leather books, but by Character and by Playing the Game. He does not, in so many words, declare himself to be the true repository of Character and the Game-playing Virtues. But the fact is patently, and rather more than gently, implied. If he had been one of those measly palm-bearers he would never, it is understood, have handled the ticklish situation at Bangawayo with such a nice command of aplomb and ammunition.

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

Now if this speech, so frankly disdainful of the intellectual virtues, were delivered to the school cricket team after the chief match of the season or to the winners of the Football Cup at Wembley, one could see some fitness in its delivery. But it is customarily propelled at the school on what is ostensibly the Feast of St. Swot, the palm-bearers' day out. They have been trooping the colours of their calf-bound volumes across the august ceremonial stage; they have been acting, with certain signals of acute distress, severed particles of scenes from the classical dramatists. But the little wretches are not going to have it all their own way. The Sahib is there to let them know that all this rigmarole and all these rewards are of no real use in the world. If the Sahib were fully articulate, which, unfortunately, he rarely is, he would explain that the prizes and the ceremony are the tribute of hypocrisy. Scholasticism dare not act openly and totally on its belief that mental schooling is so much trash. So it appoints the day and gives the prizes. But it is careful to intimate (by its choice of prize-giver) that the book-learning counts for precious little compared with stiff upper lips, straight bats, and all the other insignia of

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

Character. The little 'swots' can bear their palms and carry home their books, but they are not going to escape with the notion that they are fine or commendable children.

Nor are the assembled parents going to be horrified by the idea that the school exists to make scholars. For, if their own offspring have carried no palms, what occasion would they have for pride? What encouragement to punctual payment of considerable fees? The honours must be evened out, so that the dolts and sluggards may feel themselves quite as good as the palm-bearers and perhaps considerably better. They may not have been greatly endowed with brains and they may not have endeavoured to use such brains as they owned with any show of application, but they are the receptacles of Character, and it is perfectly obvious, both from the notable career and the expressed convictions of the Sahib that only Character really counts. So the annual paradox of speech-day recurs. First wisdom is honoured in the person of the palm-bearers, and then wisdom is firmly put in its place by the intimation that it is really good for nothing. Schools are there to make Sahibs. Salvation may be discoverable in the school chapel,

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

but it is to be remembered that the chapel is surrounded by cricket pitches and by the drill ground of the O.T.C., which was once a voluntary rabble of enthusiasts, but has, blessedly, since the War to End War been a compulsory element of the Character Factory. I often wonder, after reading about the proceedings at a school speech-day, why they do not pull down the school buildings altogether and just leave the chapel and the cricket field and the miniature rifle range.

One has come to expect this kind of June rhetoric from the major-generals and governor-generals of the retired list. They believe what they say, and their faith has carried them with some distinction to the upper branches of their own particular tree. But I was considerably surprised to find in this contingent the Archbishop of York, himself a scholar of the highest distinction and able, as I have known by my own enjoyment, to communicate the pleasures of scholarship with unusual powers of sympathy and imagination. If report was correct, he spoke to parents of Seven-oaks School in the familiar style of the speech-day Sahib. 'He was convinced that neither the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

educational system of Scotland nor of Germany had a tradition comparable with that of England – where what really mattered was not the lessons taught in the classroom but the sort of future member of society the school produced.’ I can only hope that this summarised report is an unfair one. For, if the Archbishop really spoke thus, he is not only suggesting that we might as well burn our books and pull down our classrooms, but he is also implicitly supporting the deplorable view, so popular among Sahibs, that intelligence and character have nothing in common. Dr. Temple is a Greek scholar, and he knows that the Greeks had faith in the intellectual virtues – in some cases, notably that of Socrates, possibly far too much faith. To put it briefly, the Greeks believed that you could not live a good life unless you used your brains and that hard thinking was an essential part of virtue. It is the English tradition to be suspicious of thoughtful or well-informed children and to submit them to the discipline of prefects, who are in theory chosen for Character and, in fact, for prowess at games. The justification of the prefecture is that it trains men for leadership, though it is plainly not hard to be a leader

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

when you have size and muscle on your side and the right to thrash any of the smaller urchins who is careless or independent enough to disobey you.

It is surely time that the promoters and celebrants of scholastic festivals abandoned this practice of sneering at scholastic achievement and making obeisance to an undefined splendour called Character. Character is a noun which needs an adjective; by itself it only means 'a stamp', and a child can be stamped with anything, from a too priggish zest for bearing palms to an equally priggish pride in muscular cretinism. To praise 'Character' without defining it is absurd, and I suggest that the speech-day orators who habitually make Character their topic would do well to be more explicit. Is the future member of society a better citizen for being ignorant and contemptuous of history and economics, the arts and the sciences? The distinction between 'lessons taught in the classroom' and the external accumulation of character is preposterous. Are we going to have better citizens if the recruits to civic status arrive with no knowledge of the world's problems but with a vast endowment of prefectorial leadership, upper

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

lips indubitably stiff, and bats unquestionably straight?

Doubtless the Sahibs honestly believe it because they regard all use of mind as 'subversive', which in some sort it is. But those of us who believe that the civilisation of our time may reasonably be 'subverted' and converted in quite a number of directions have good reason to disagree. I believe that the original idea of a Grammar School was a place where grammar was taught, grammar in its old, inclusive sense of general scholarly attainment. The school's job was to turn out informed, intelligent adolescents. The ethics were left to the home and to the individual. The educational snobbery of the Victorians created a large number of public schools (mimic Etons at popular prices) and plastered England with public school pretensions. These foundations, often far behind the Grammar Schools in their capacity to impart information and stimulate intelligence, tried to cover up their failure by explaining themselves as Character Factories and forcing beds of a mysterious quality called Leadership, about which much is heard on Speech Day. To make the annual prize-giving an opportunity for rewarding with a volume those

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

who bear the palm, while simultaneously snubbing them with a general depreciation of brain-work, is, to use the darling phrase of the Sahibs, scarcely cricket. But still they play it.

### (2) *The New Barbarian*

And now let us turn, for a while, to the other opponent of mental Education. He is, in every respect except his contempt for the intellectual processes, the exact opposite of the Old Barbarian. He is as gentle as a lamb and in his capacity as dominie he would shudder to own cane or tawse. He will boast that, if a rude child comes and kicks him, he immediately turns the other buttock, so that violence may be most Christianly put to shame. It is true that this kind of pedagogue has often little use for Christianity and it may be a point of honour with him to have no Bible on the premises; this is a trifle hard on his pupils who, quite apart from any ethical value of the Good Book, are likely to grow up with a complete ignorance of the most common allusions and quotations. The New Barbarian is only too easily charged with the mental barbarism implied in a



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

total contempt for the intellectual traditions of civilisation; undoubtedly the psychological foundation of his work assumes that intelligence is of very much less importance than impulse and instinct. Dr. Harry Roberts, in an article in the *Week-End Review* (July 22nd, 1933) on the modernist movement in education quotes the following remarks written by leaders of that movement. 'Man is at heart good and kind and honest; culture introduces the serpent into Man's Eden; the law makes the crime; discipline converts the child's natural love into hate, his goodness into evil. When cultural standards of behaviour are removed, bad boys become good boys.' It is all so simple. The Old Barbarian observes, cane in hand, 'When sadistic sanctions are applied, bad boys become good boys.' The New Barbarian retorts, with Rousseau on the brain, 'when cultural standards of behaviour are removed, etc., etc.' You pay your 150 guineas and you take your choice. The summary of the new evangel lies in this. 'The only safe guide is instinct, which is divine. . . . An aim of education should be to keep the child from thinking.' Well, that is explicit. Cultural standards are the ultimate sin. To keep the

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

child from thinking is the ultimate virtue. On the latter point it is worth noticing that the New Barbarian is in entire agreement with the Old. It may, however, be said on behalf of Bowenism ('God give us bases to guard and beleaguer') that it did offer a substitute for mental activity. There were the chapel and the cricket field. But the new method of averting the repulsive hazards of thought, or worse still, of assimilating facts, is to turn the children loose in a garden and leave them 'to express themselves'. My own impression is that most children, like most adults, have nothing in particular to express. They do not relish endless opportunities for gratifying their instincts. The instincts very soon begin to run dry and then they look round for somebody to tell them what to do. And why, incidentally, are instincts always divine? Was the instinct to kick the headmaster in the pants an admonition straight from heaven? I am inclined to think it must have been.

The Liberty Hall type of school which is now beginning to attract the attention of half-baked intellectuals, who, like the Sahibs, cannot be bothered to look after their own children and who

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

think it rather fun for the brats to speak dirty language before they are able to read clean, is founded, as has been seen, on some vaguely Rousseauite notions of the Noble Child as the younger and blonder brother of the Noble Savage. This may be a sounder philosophical foundation than that of the respectable Public School. Philosophical foundations are not easily constructed or understood and the Englishman has never made up his mind whether the child is a little devil or a little angel. For centuries the devil-theory held the field and it was, therefore, the first duty of a pastor or master to whip the devil out of the offending flesh; the child was a bundle of original sin and only by suffering could the wretch be saved. The whole subject has been most entertainingly and informatively discussed by Mr. Hugh Kingsmill in his Essay on 'From Shakespeare to Dean Farrar' in a volume called *After Puritanism*. The Romantic movement, asserting that 'heaven lies about us in our infancy' naturally rebelled against the flagellomaniac practices of men like Busby and Keate, which were the natural and violent expression of Old Testament incitements to the rod and of a theology which believed in the natural viciousness

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

of all flesh. Redemption from this grievous state came firstly by Christ; but caning held a good second place. The angel-theory of childhood, implicit in Wordsworth's 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality', did not really gain much ground in the nineteenth century, despite the lavish attempts of Charles Dickens to foster it. The average parent might sob over the pallid Dickensian mites with the light of heaven bursting from eyelids that were soon to close in premature death. But the parent was not so far impressed as to abandon punishment in the home or to forbid the schoolmaster his outfit of reports, black-marks, impositions, and canes. Squeers might have to cover up his tracks but he did not disappear, and a modern headmaster, Mr. Guy Kendall, has recently confessed in a book of reminiscences that part of his 'prep' school experience was gained in an academy whose dietary may have been an improvement on that of Dotheboys Hall but whose discipline was Squeersian to the last stripe. Dr. Thwackum had not died out then and is not yet extinct.

But at last the angel-theory has received a full liberation in practice and the new theorists of

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

education inform us that 'instinct is divine', doctrine precisely similar to Shakespeare's

'We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' the sun,  
And bleat the one at the other; what we changed  
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not  
The doctrine of ill-doing, no, nor dream'd  
That any did,'

### And Wordsworth's

'Heaven lies about us in our infancy;  
Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
Upon the growing Boy.  
But he beholds the light and whence it glows,  
He sees it in his joy.  
The Youth, who daily farther from the east  
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,  
And by the vision splendid  
Is on his way attended.  
At length the man perceives it die away  
And fade into the light of common day.'

The new model school was designed for the frisking of lambs and for boys who, of kindly nature, beheld the light. What they chose to do was bound to be admirable. Instinct was divine and ill-doing but a figment of the ugly, adult imagination.

It need not greatly occupy the observation or the brain-power of any ordinary person to realise that one theory of childhood is as idiotic as the other.

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

At a 'Liberty Hall' school children do not cease to tease and even to torment each other; the weakest still go to the wall and probably go there rather more rapidly owing to the absence of authority whose function is to prevent bullying. This is not a mere assumption; it is based on the statements of children who have suffered under the liberty of these anarchic academies. The libertarians' contention that repressive discipline for the young does not create goodness but rather incites to cunning evasions and duplicity is probably true, but it is equally true that no discipline at all leaves the persecutor far greater opportunity to have his little joke. Of course it is not asserted that all children are naturally cruel; it is enough for two or three to have offensive impulses and the school can be turned into a hell for many.

Furthermore, there is the boredom. Leaving children to express themselves is, after the novelty has faded, leaving them to bore themselves. It is my own experience, and I believe it to be a common one, that children do not resent orders, provided the orders are reasonable in kind and not excessive in number. The tyranny of organised and compulsory games, which has made so many

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

English boys hate their Public Schools, lay not in the organisation of athletics but in the overdoing of the whole business. It is just as tyrannical to deny a child team-games as to inflict them upon him against his will. An arranged time-table is more often a relief than an imposition. My friend the school-inspector had a most instructive story to tell in this connection. A teacher at a 'Liberty Hall' school observed the utter boredom of the children who were expected to do what interested them when and where they pleased. The wretched infants wandered about at a loss. So she put it to them that it would be nice to have a time-table and a set of rules. The idea was so eagerly taken up and the system became so popular that other children in the school went to their teachers and asked eagerly for time-tables and rules. This appalling state of affairs came to the notice of the head-mistress, who was naturally outraged at such a defiance of the New Psychology. The offending mistress, who had tried to relieve the boredom of her charges, was dismissed. Such is Liberty Hall.

I do not believe that children dislike drudgery; I do not believe that they dislike regulations. There must be common sense behind the regime

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

and moderation in its exercise. What I do believe is that Liberty Hall methods can bore them; whether or no Satan finds mischief for the idle hand, there can certainly be a sense of frustration and of weariness in young lives which are given no sort of direction. Furthermore it seems to me intensely cruel to bring up children in a community run on totally different lines from the world which they will ultimately have to enter. Those who have had their young environment so carefully 'harmonised' – I accept, for the moment, the terminology of Liberty Hall – are likely to feel extremely miserable when suddenly subjected to the discipline and drudgery of a business or professional career with long hours of confinement in rather dreary premises and scarcely any opportunity for the blessed self-development on the lines along which their 'free' education has carried them.

At present the children who go to Free Schools, with their go-as-you-please tradition, are mainly the sons and daughters of unusual parents and these parents may be able to save their offspring from routine careers. But the routine career has to absorb the vast majority of the nation's scholars and, if the Free Schools become numerous, there



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

will be a great many cases of pupils being suddenly jerked from the anarchies of the school-house into the narrow and uncongenial atmosphere of the warehouse and the office. To encourage children to develop their own tastes and to work only or mainly at what interests them, sounds logical enough; but if, when they have found their bent and followed it, perhaps with application and with brilliance, it is obvious that no livelihood awaits them in its further pursuit, will not the subsequent disgust with adult status be intense?

I have no interest in self-denial and self-suppression for their own sakes; I value them solely as means to greater happiness. I see no moral gain in abnegations and sufferings and I am considering the educational problem frankly from a hedonistic standpoint. It is just for this reason that I am a little doubtful about the blessings to flow from education without imposed restraints. If boys and girls have been used to surroundings as harmonic as the wit of man and woman can make them, used to a continual presence of liberty, used to pursuing just those subjects which suit their tastes and talents, used to feeling that the world is a nice elastic place which will charitably bend

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

before their inclinations, I do not believe that their introduction to the business of wage-earning will be anything but an experience of acute disharmonies or, to put it vulgarly, a rotten bad time. If they can find the perfect niche on leaving school, they are indeed blessed. But what if they do not? It is worth remembering that the period of early puberty is capable of producing a vast amount of restlessness and morbid self-pity; it is just at this time that the pupil of 'Liberty Hall' is likely to be ejected into the constraints of the wage-earning world. If he has been encouraged by the kind of headmaster who invites the unruly member to be unruly until he is sick of it, the said member will discover very sharply that his new 'boss' has other notions of exorcising devilry. The passage from school to adult status should be a happy liberation. 'Liberty Hall' is doing its best to make it an imprisonment and to intensify the agony of growing-pains.

### (3) *Common Sense*

All this, it may be said, has carried us nowhere in particular. It is a mere assortment of negations.

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

But, before we can understand what education should attempt, we must clear away the rival claims of an absolutist psychology, first the claim that children are natural limbs of Satan only to be saved by the ceaseless application of rods and rules, and secondly the counter-claim that they are angels animated by the blameless impulse until the villainous elders warp their inherent perfection by the imposition of commands and disciplines. Having committed all such nonsense to the flames, we can ask afresh what the school's job really is. To me it seems obvious that its business is to make scholars, that is creatures using and developing their natural ability to reason and sufficiently informed about the intellectual legacy which past use of reason has handed down. We shall not be frightened by the asinine chatter about 'repression'. Life without repressions is intolerable, since repression is the first condition of good manners and social decency. On the other hand we shall not be frightened by any disciplinarian cant about Character, for when a pedagogue cries up his school as a character-factory, this usually means that he is shirking his proper business of educating or leading-out the mind.

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

There are, I am sure, a number of schools which are animated by common sense principles instead of being hag-ridden by fantastic theories of the infant psyche. The achievement of a balance between Thwackum House and Liberty Hall is growing and at the same time it is increasingly understood that the function of education is to further the use of the mental faculties on a foundation of accepted fact. I am all for implanting a certain measure of scepticism in the young mind, but we cannot base education on a denial of all tradition, on pulling rude faces at history, or on dismissing the cultural inheritance of man as so much bourgeois twaddle. The basis of cultural fact has often been too narrow, notably in the older type of classical schooling. But that widens. Meanwhile, it does seem true that the people who have been put through the 'grand old fortifying curriculum' have a greater tendency to know what they are talking about than those more modernly trained. Having to do translation forces the pupil to inquire what words mean; he cannot begin to compose in another language without first analysing his own and there is no more necessary business in education

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

than the compulsion to analyse one's phrases and define one's terms; the man or woman who uses words without the ability to explain their meaning is not only a social nuisance but a peril to society. Anybody can fool him. Anybody can get his vote. Anybody can drag him into half a dozen wars for liberty.

Not long ago I heard education tartly defined as casting sham pearls before real swine. Perhaps the second category summed up myself and classmates, but the first needed further limitation. Some of the pearls were real rough, but they were all on the same string. Discussing the definition with a friend, I lamented the narrowness of my schooling. I deplored my gross ignorance of astronomy; a music-hall comedian may know when planets change their spots, but I do not know one planet from another and am generally vague as to which celestial body is circumambulating which. My acquaintance with beasts and birds, a tardy and trivial smattering, owes nothing whatever to my pastors and masters, whose main object was to keep nature out of bounds and only cricket and football within these strict confines. My botany and geology were rivals in their shame-

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

ful slenderness. History and geography were diminutive, mathematics rapidly and not unwillingly forgotten, modern languages deplorable, music and architecture mysteries beyond the pale (unless they happened to be Greek), chemistry and physics nil. What a record to have been expensively achieved at the age of twenty-two! My friend had to state something of a case, since he is himself now engaged in a lofty position upon a similar, though happily not identical, education of the young. He said, 'Well, they taught you the only thing that matters.' On being asked the nature of this treasure, he defined it as the ability to tell sense from nonsense.

The assumption was highly flattering to me and a good debating point into the bargain. For if I asserted that my education had failed to do this he could retort that my opinion, in such case, was worthless. But let me not intrude my own experience or my nose for nonsense any farther. His definition of a good education was a sound one and was never more necessary than in this epoch with its huge mechanism of a chattering-smattering culture whose main result seems to be bosh in widest commonalty spread. Education should have

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

taught people to use words; instead it has only helped them to absorb words and spew them up undigested. Every examiner knows that one boy or girl in a hundred may be infected with a furious lust for words, the longer and more resonant the better, and will pour them onto paper in a wild pride of lexicography. That does no particular harm; it is rather a sign of original virtue. The pupil at least has a flair and a passion for something. The fever will pass; the passion behind it may remain. But the majority swallow down words as though they were realities, and they proceed to civic status and responsibilities with a quite extraordinary incapacity for defining their own terms or asking others to do the same.

Nothing is now more common than the use of flattering terms in order to effect purposes which the public would not endure if presented under their accurate titles. This habit may work for righteousness, because fools may thereby be driven into accepting sensible measures, but it is surely a humiliating thought that humanity in this epoch of general schooling has to be cozened into common sense by verbal manipulation. A very interesting article on this subject recently appeared

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

in the *American Spectator* under the justified title of 'The New Statesmanship'. Its author, Mr. Albert Cahn, observed that 'The main qualification of the newer statesmen is the ability to use a lexicon. For the solution of the most ticklish problems of government is now accomplished by finding a new word for them.' He used as instances the way in which the angry opponents of financial inflation in the United States were suddenly pacified by the use of the magical but scarcely dissimilar word 'reflation'. Hysteria during the collapse of American banking was averted by the President's neat adoption of the cheerful phrase 'Bank Holiday'. Mr. Cahn concluded: 'Also the War debts will have to be worked out along these lines. It is certain that the debts cannot be paid, and it is equally certain that they should not be defaulted. Some new word will have to be found. A suggestion is "credit re-establishment". That means nothing and sounds as if it should do the work.' Why, in any case, do not nations call debts by the kindlier name of capital, as the capitalists do? The capitalists, indeed, have understood the new statesmanship for some time; when they have had to bilk their creditors they have always called



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

it 'reconstruction', whereas the silly politicians still go on using the honest word 'default'.

The same principle can be used to put an attractive veneer on most unattractive deeds and principles. Not even the Communists have battered Socialism as brutally as those who sought the suffrage of the German workers under the democratic title of National Socialists. Contemporary politics, indeed, have carried the power of false nomenclature to a conclusion so absurd that it almost passes credibility. In the United States, where it was physically dangerous even to call yourself a Radical, while the name of Socialist was a sure passport to penal servitude, in the United States, with its deep-rooted tradition of economic individualism, they have been exercising a State control of industry far more rigorous and extensive than exists anywhere out of Russia. All this has been accepted because it is tactfully called National Recovery. In Germany, on the other hand, the capitalists and landowners recently entrenched themselves under the superscription of 'National Socialism'. In short, the world is still desperately lacking in true education, which can distinguish between words and meanings, sense

## NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

and nonsense. And it will remain so if we accept the preposterous assertion of our scatter-brained, impulse-worshipping reformers that the business of education is 'to keep the child from thinking'. All that will do is to produce a political Bedlam in which word-mongers can do as they please, a slaughter-house in which clichés pull the trigger. A proper mental training will accept as its motto the admirable epigram of Thomas Hobbes,

‘Words are wise men’s counters, they do but reckon by them; but they are the money of fools.’

## CHAPTER IX

### MYTHS AND MAGIC

DEMOCRACY may be simply summarised as hard work. It makes enormous demands on the intelligence and toleration of the average individual. It necessitates social spirit in the ruler and eternal vigilance in the ruled. It stimulates what Walt Whitman brilliantly called 'the never-ending audacity of elected persons'. For its proper working the political machinery must be flexible and it is the nature of political machines to be stiff and slow. Over and over again in the history of the world the idea of self-government either by assemblies or by representatives in assembly gathered has shown its head and been romantically hailed as the deliverer. 'The very name of it is beautiful,' cries a speaker in Herodotus, quoted by Professor Gilbert Murray. 'A tyrant disturbs ancient laws, violates women, kills men without

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

trial. But a people ruling – first the very name of it is beautiful; and, secondly, a people does none of these things.’ Professor Murray went on to point out that twenty-five years later an Athenian, coming from the Mother of democracies, said to the Spartans, ‘Of course all sensible men know what democracy is and I, better than most, having suffered; but there is nothing new to be said about acknowledged insanity.’ The fruit of democracy is always disenchantment. And how quickly the romantic flower of hope withers in that promising soil. The poets who sing the revolutions of Demos end quietly in reactionary graves. Parliaments are padlocked by the erstwhile democrat. Dictators are nearly always romantic radicals who seize short cuts and suddenly find themselves, a little bewildered but still gesticulating, as the keepers of the Tory garden. So Mussolini, so Hitler, so, in his more hum-drum way, Macdonald. It is the Cæsarian and Napoleonic tradition. Was not young Julius suspected of an early association with the communism of Catiline? It is the everlasting destiny of democracy to be assassinated by its darling sons.

The flight from democracy is fundamentally a

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

flight from belief in the reasoning powers of the individual. Democracy, in large communities, has to work through mass-verdicts and, the larger the community, the more easily does a sense of dwarfish impotence fall upon the individual. What is one vote among twenty million? Why, then should I bother? The rule of all is the rule of none. At the same time, while democracy uses the mass-verdict, it has a tradition of maintaining individual rights. It need hardly be said that the practice falls far behind the ideal and that the existence of Parliamentary government does not necessarily liberate the individual in matters of personal conduct. Political liberties do not guarantee social liberty; social liberty may flourish under an autocracy which closes the mind but not the pub. On the whole, one may say that there is more likelihood of individual liberty and of opportunity for the use of reason and of will-power in a democracy than in an autocracy. Democracy arises at times of common energy, when the average man is eager to think and to decide, and collapses in times of general fatigue, when the average man feels that the business of thinking, deciding and then watching the men of his choice, is not worth

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

the trouble. It would be much more comfortable to shuffle off these responsibilities on the vociferous and magnetic person who offers to accept them. The end of a prolonged and exhausting war is nearly always fatal to the democratic idea. We heard much in 1914 about 'a war for democracy'. But democracy was one of its certain casualties.

It is a great deal easier for most people to go to church and worship emotionally than to sit down and think out problems of theology. Religion is always on the safe path when it invites the weary to come and enjoy a good rest. An active religion will, of course, ask more of its adherents, but many of them will regard the spiritual repose as their sufficient contribution to the faith. So, in the secular world, fatigue and bewilderment, the natural legacy of prolonged conflict, invite autocracy. Furthermore they create the devotional mood in the market-place as much as in the church. An age which is licking its wounds is ready for romantic figures, slogans, swastikas, myths, and magic. For such a demand there will always be some sort of supply. Perhaps the Hero as Generalissimo returns with his legions to put the chattering

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

senators in their place. Perhaps the hero is just the Eloquent Bully, the eternal Cleon. Perhaps he is a man of real political ability. But the technique is the same; it is deification. A Tyranny, paradoxically, is not only popular, but immensely, feverishly popular in a way that democracy can never be. The people fall over themselves in a new scramble to be rid of their toilsome liberties. Accordingly the new hero turns himself into a Myth and creates the legend of his own omnipotent ability. If he does not actually create it, the people in their romantic fervour, will force the Myth upon him and trample down any realistic or critical observer who is scant of deference. A democracy that has emerged from a crisis of war or finance simply cries out for a romantic figure as its leader. It is probably true that the job of leading cannot be done without the aid of such magic. Accordingly the autocrat immediately proceeds to the creation of symbols, special clothes, special signs, special salutes. Even in America, where the toughest individualists have suddenly swallowed Socialism because it has been tactfully labelled National Recovery, the Myth of Omnipotent Roosevelt has been assisted with natty phrases,

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

emotional campaigns, and the symbolic badge of the eagle.

The up-to-date autocrat has one enormous advantage hitherto denied to the players of his game. Wireless gives him discreet approach to every home. He can short-circuit Parliaments, officials, authorities, and even the Press. The microphone is the greatest of all megaphones. President Roosevelt, happening to possess a first-rate 'mike-side' manner, has been adroitly reaching the heart of America by radio. He can propound and explain and recommend his schemes to the entire nation and exploit a form of publicity, which, provided the people are sufficiently anxious to listen, is infinitely more powerful than that of any newspaper. On the whole, this may be a valuable change in the technique of dictatorship, because it substitutes persuasion for the baser form of personality-mongering. On the other hand, where the wireless machine is entirely controlled by the Government, it simply confirms the power of the dictator to present only one side of a case and to present it incessantly and on the widest scale. The next war, if civilisation is to commit that act of suicide, will be fought in the air in



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

two senses; I am inclined to think that the ethereal word will be as influential as the bombing aeroplane.

But this is a side-issue. What concerns us now is the return to Hero-Worship and the cult of Magic, Black, Brown, Green or Red, in place of political reason. The Germans, under Hitler, spend their days raising the right arm; they may not raise a critical voice. With the worship of the Man goes the worship of the Mass. It is part of the creed that the mass worships itself, with the Man as its crown and symbol. This is the doctrine of the Totalitarian State under autocratic guidance. Judged by any canons of reason the Totalitarian State is as absurd in theory as it is oppressive and abominable in practice. In Germany it exploits an antiquated racialism which is so much fiddle-sticks. The Noble Aryan is as empty a myth as the Noble Savage. Such a theory gives aristocratic glamour to the democratic herd-instinct and so makes the worst of both worlds. It is jealous and intolerant of any distinction that cannot be given its own label. But do not let us suppose that such pernicious nonsense is a particular monopoly of any one country. The British Empire has carefully fostered

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

its own notion of the Pukka Sahib and has zealously kept out of any important office the product of the mixed marriage. And similar rubbish about the ethical splendours of the Gael has been propelled at the heads of the Irish people. Men of mind and education, who ought to have known far better, have attributed magical qualities to racial and linguistic distinction. I remember that in 1920, during a visit to Ireland, I had some delightful conversation with A. E., who was at that time much enchanted with the idea of a Gaelic-speaking, Gaelic-thinking Ireland. I asked him what good it would do the people to revive a moribund language. He told me that it would have a wonderful effect on their character. A young lady of the faith also eagerly assured me that compulsory Gaelic would make Ireland pure of heart. A.E., having seen Gaelic Ireland arise in her splendour, has since come to live in London; apparently the spectacle has been too much for him. He appears to have lost his faith in grammar and lexicon as the vessels of spiritual healing. I gather from a dispatch sent to the *Manchester Guardian* from Berlin on October 21st, 1933, that the Germans were already beginning to weary of the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

physical jerks imposed by their own Hero-worship. The correspondent described a procession in honour of Hand-Work as opposed to Machine-Labour.

‘The procession was headed by a car on which was a general in armour on a dummy armoured horse carrying an immense javelin, which appeared to represent a German emperor. He was surrounded by men in armour. There were people in medieval costumes, both on the cars and walking in the procession, but most of the demonstrators were in their ordinary clothes. . . .

‘There was a fairly large crowd of sightseers, some of whom religiously lifted a hand whenever a Nazi flag or emblem went by, but they were in a minority. Flags go by in Berlin so often that people are tired of living half their time with their arms in the air.

‘In a speech at Rostock yesterday to 3,600 university professors and other educationists Herr Schemm, the Mecklenburg Minister of Culture, described the foundations of “the new Germany” as “race and soul, nation and God”. He said they wished once more “to rear up

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

Siegfried natures and Parsifal natures, men who could fashion life anew under the sign of National Socialism”.’

The idea that life can be modelled anew by exclusive concentration on a single language, a single mode of thought, a single type of physique and physiognomy, or a single series of slogans and gestures is a superstition so ignorant and absurd that its continued existence is an argument for almost total pessimism about the human race. Such a fanaticism must inevitably take the form of persecution; the other thoughts must be censored, the other physiques flogged or imprisoned, the other languages put beyond the pale. Alien cultures must be rigorously excluded. A contemporary Ireland will not admit Mr. Shaw's views on religion. No citizen of Kerry may go in search of the Shavian Black Girl, who is legally taboo.

The Totalitarian State is the Medieval Church, with all its hideous persecution of the heretic and none of its liturgical beauty and devotion to the graces of life. What could be more flame-worthy than such reliance on the bonfire? The idea of the Nation United as One Man puts before us as

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

repulsive a future as can be offered to the human mind. It is worth remembering, as Mr. Robert Dell once observed, that the Gadarene swine were united as one pig.

But, lest we become self-righteous in our condemnation of Gaelic isolationism or the Totalitarian trash of the Hitlerised Teuton, it is prudent to reflect on the real foundation of these and similar creeds. It is the rejection of the individual's right to be an individual, to think and decide for himself. Herr Schmidt ceases to be a clerk with a job and a family; he is a German Aryan and a member of the German Nation; in that he is irrecoverably merged. He must abdicate from any sovereignty of self, any assertion of the individual mind and the particular will. The pestilent doctrine of a General Will, which is supposed to be greater and nobler than the sum of all the particular wills, was invented by the sentimental and romantic Rousseau and gladly accepted and developed by the German Hegelian school of thought; the Germans saw where it would lead, but the English Liberals, who foolishly accepted it as an excuse for State Interference, did not realise that its logical conclusion would not be a mild dose of

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

paternal legislation but a total disappearance of all individual rights. Similarly the Irish peasant ceases to be a person with his own personal problems; he is to be swallowed up (submerged or sublimated, call it what you will) in a Gaelic Revival; he must speak Gael, think Gael, trade Gael; if there is no Gaelic trading available, the fanatic will tell him to do without. It is as infamous for the Gael to swallow the beer of English Burton as for the Aryan to accept wisdom from Einstein the Jew. The object of statecraft is here to create a graven image, a Mumbo-Jumbo; before this abstraction of a Mass Divinity, this image demanding its perpetual ration of mental sacrifice, every knee shall bow, every mind shall be closed, every shirt shall be dyed, and every right hand shall shoot mechanically into the air.

Such doctrine finds support in the romanticism of the time. It is first cousin to the cult of Tom-Tom and Tum-Tum so enthusiastically blessed by D. H. Lawrence. Any spell-binder may claim to be the Lawrentian aristocrat with the moon in his belly. It is worth noticing that Lawrence, who railed against the humdrum many, the bowler-hat, the bourgeois mind, and every aspect of the

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

British mob, was capable of mass-worship when the mass had a coloured skin and was writhing in its spasms of superb abdominal consciousness. He gloried in the absorption of the individual in the savage herd; stopping to think was not his strong point; had he done so he must surely have perceived how fatal to any kind of civilisation is this campaigning against the separate mind, the alone-standing man. The alone-standing man, ideal of Ibsen, was a nineteenth-century concept; he stood with his feet in rationality. Our twentieth-century progressives have little use for him, whether they are devotees of the Left or the Right. Russian Communism has beaten the toms-toms of Mass-Worship just as enthusiastically as Hitler himself, flourishing the hammer and sickle as others the swastika and the Grand Old Flag. It has well-nigh deified its dead leader, Lenin, worshipping the Pharaoh-mummy like the Egyptians of old. It has elaborated a myth of the Holy Proletariat, which has its own culture, its Proletcult, to be carefully preserved from the infection of profane or bourgeois notions. It has its Proletarian Ideology (fearful phrase), its Proletarian kinema, theatre, and so on. In short it has constructed a legend of the

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

Noble Toiler as others have constructed legends of the Noble Aryan, Noble Briton, or Noble Gael.

But, it may be argued, have you not your own legend of the Ideal Individual, are you not romanticising the use of reason and of will? Surely not. There is no assertion, against experience and plain fact, that the individual is necessarily a hero or a genius; he most obviously is not. But he has a right to be so, if he can, and he is unlikely to be so if he is forced to subdue his own personality into the likeness of some deified abstraction, some tyrannical mass. But the Mass-Myth fascinates a fatigued or baffled or frustrated people; it demands no critical power; it exacts no sense of responsibility; it is easy and it flatters. It puts a splash of colour into the citizen's life if he can imagine himself as the instrument of a Mighty and Magnanimous Force. If he is a dull man, incapable of colouring his own life, that is something for nothing. Besides he soon sees that, if he plays his game shrewdly, he can become one of the chosen, the party, the brotherhood, the shock troop, in short a gangster in a community where rights have been abolished and gangsters can collect the plums which others have



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

been forced to pick. The others, who do the picking, are meanwhile given just enough bread for their bellies, enough music of drum and trumpet for their ears, and a few comfortable slogans for their minds. The mass, accordingly, bows down to itself in its tumult of mass-worship and accepts the Dictator of the mass as a reflection of its own virtues and aspirations. This obliging credibility makes things easy for the Dictator who can announce that he is asserting the incomparable ideals of an incomparable Race, Class, Nation, or any other sect, when he is, in fact, murdering or imprisoning anybody who still claims the right to a private opinion. Liberty, in this case, will be variously denounced as a bourgeois concept by the Communist, as a Jewish concept by the Aryan, or as a tedious nineteenth-century superstition by the up-to-date gentleman in a red or black shirt. How far this state of mind can progress I once experienced during an argument on paper with a Communist. When I convicted him of lying, he retorted airily that he did not care, since truth, anyway, was 'a bourgeois metaphysical conception'.

It is extremely easy to notice the faulty working of a democratic machine and to ridicule the

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

character of the party politician. But what is the alternative? That is a fair and essential question. Mr. Wells imagines the salvation of the world by clear-eyed engineers. Mr. Shaw has replied with Magnus, his philosopher-king in *The Apple Cart*. Mr. Shaw is no romantic; indeed his ideal of a mental existence, freed from all stings of sense, expounded in *Back to Methuselah* is rationalism carried to its uttermost and rather arid limits. But, as a rationalist, he ought to see the dangers of romantic hero-worship inherent in the dictatorship of a supposed super-man. Why should we expect the super-man to be discovered at the crucial moment? To assume that the alternative to a commonplace Cabinet is a Shavian genius is merely wanton. Shaw, in fact, posits a reign of autocratic reason as the successor to democratic cant. But how dare we hope for such an exchange? What happens when democracies go down may so easily be the return to romantic hocus-pocus with the jumped-up Dictator exploiting the emotions of the mass either by military triumphs or by self-deification. Cæsar used both methods in his pursuit of popular power. He and his successor, Augustus, clamped the Roman world together and imposed

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

a peace of sorts; but all that was best in Rome died under the Empire. The Roman populace became pampered, childish, superstitious and lost its Roman virtues among the bread and circuses provided by the new God-Emperor on whom it showered the cheap reward of divine honours. The finer minds were driven to irony and satire; the Stoic shrugged his shoulders and cut his veins, the sooner to escape. If we could be sure that the collapse of the exacting democratic ideal, a community of individuals each capable of thought, choice, and toleration, would certainly bring the arrival of Philosopher-Kings or of a Platonic Republic with a Board of Omniscents as its managing directors, we could more gladly survey the attacks upon self-government. But that is not what happens or is likely to happen. We have to decide between a choice of evils; either we plod on with the democratic machine, which is admittedly inadequate for rapid decisions and bold, well-planned action. Or we take a chance with the Man, a gamble in political romanticism, a desperate throw whose price may be the total loss of personal rights. Democracy fails when it forgets that rights imply duties; autocracy fails, by any

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

civilised standards, when it forgets that without rights there can be no dignity in human existence. Romanticism always runs to extremes, either proclaiming natural rights on the Left or denying legal ones on the Right. Only a realistic examination of what man needs to be saved can offer any hope of a secure and civilised society; what man does need is the freedom to think and the ability to execute his thoughts by the free use of will. But that, as this chapter initially insisted, is extremely hard work. Romantic short-cuts are so much easier.

It is interesting to observe that a form of Christian revival which has attracted a good deal of attention and support in recent times is essentially emotional. Christianity has behind it an immense tradition and treasury of reason naturally applied to its supernatural postulates; this is called dogma or theology and it is fashionable nowadays, when the reasoning process is so unpopular, to assert that what is wrong with religion is a surfeit of theology. No dogma is so popular as the dogmatic assertion that dogma is all wrong. Young people, it is alleged, cannot be expected to bother with such fusty, tiresome stuff. One is continually being

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

assured, by popular athletes and others whose opinions about God are publicly canvassed as being of first-rate value, that God is possibly in his heaven but that any attempt to rationalise his relations with man (i.e. theology) will assuredly empty the churches by making God extremely unpopular. If that is true, it affords a most unpromising commentary on the present state of the human mind, which has not, in the past, refused to justify its faith by works of logic. True or not, the contemporary approach to religion, which seems to have most effect on the young, lies in total abdication of the individual's reasoning powers. Mr. Buchman's Groups or Teams of Life-Changers, who have usurped the name of Oxford to give authority to their somewhat primitive goings-on, are great believers in what they call guidance. When a man or a woman is in difficulties the recipe is not to think things out with the God-given faculty of reason, nor even to consult any ethical tradition or authority, but to sit down, among others in the same state of bewilderment, with an open or empty mind, a pencil in the hand, and paper on the table. Then they are to listen-in to God and write down what God tells them. To some extent this is only

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

the Quaker notion of an Inner Light vulgarised with the paraphernalia of a paper-game and the terminology of the five-valve set. The Groupists, whom I resolutely refuse to call Oxonian, are certainly not all innocent of vulgarity. To what extent Mr. A. J. Russell's book *For Sinners Only* is an authorised text and carries the Buchman blessing, has not, I think, been made plain. But its mixture of salvation and salesmanship is certainly well designed to meet the taste of readers whose more usual fare may well be the Film-Fan's Budget.

'Frank (i.e. The Prophet Buchman) likes to think in the plural when organising a life-changing campaign. He would much sooner take a hundred life-changers into a city than one or two. Musical comedy touring companies, he argues, take fifty or sixty players into a town. Why should not the Groups do the same?'

'Maximum Effort, No lone-wolfing,' is his motto! It will be observed that Generalissimo Buchman is here closely copying the well-tried technique of General Booth. Why should the devil have all the best tunes? Let us run religion with the competent

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

publicity otherwise reserved for leg-shows; let us beat down sales-resistance with a mass-attack. In a similar spirit the story is told by Mr. Russell of a city engineer 'an acid atheist, notorious for his hard drinking and fast living'. Under the vigorous attention of a Group, he found a new life and 'made a habit of dropping in on the padre for what he called "a spot of prayer".' The vocabulary of Groupism can be left at that.

Groupism appears to be devoid of dogma. Its practitioners receive 'luminous thoughts' and go forth crusading against Sin. The best definition of Sin is supplied as, 'anything in my life which keeps me from God and other people'. As a definition it is certainly vague; but then nobody need look to Groupism for hard and fast lines of thought. It is a moral urge, stimulated by sharing the confession of sins and the reception of divine guidance. Essentially, then, the form of faith which is undoubtedly making a great appeal to the present generation is intuitional and not rational. It is also profoundly emotional. It abounds in heartiness, Public School Spirit, and Team-work. One evangelist is described as a 'mis-chief-maker for God . . . always the merry school-

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

boy still rejoicing in tuck and English tea at all hours of the day and night'. There is special emphasis on the Broad Smile. Here is a typical pen-picture of Mr. Buchman.

'He came into my room at Cambridge before seven in pyjamas to wish me good morning. His face was hidden behind a foam of shaving-soap; yet merriment broke through. That morning Frank told me he not only believed in getting up when the cock crew, but he believed in crowing as well. He was crowing with joy that wet April morning. The Lord was so good to him, he said.'

Well, that, no doubt, is charming for all concerned, and nobody in his senses would suggest the possibility of religion without emotion, or would like it to be wrapped, as it too often has been, in clouds of gloom. A religion without some form of rapture would be a philosophy, which is quite different a matter. But most religions which have appealed to civilised communities have had a back-bone of reasoned doctrine. If you believe in a God who has relations with



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

the inhabitants of this earth it seems natural to inquire what those relations are and how they are maintained and communicated. Merely to say 'God is good' is idiotic; His goodness, in the face of human suffering, must be proven. I fail to see how any form of Christianity can appeal to intelligent human beings which does not lay down some theory about the divine scheme and about the necessity for an Incarnation and Redemption by Crucifixion. It may be impossible so to theorise about the Problem of Evil as to satisfy the curious or antagonistic mind. But at least that task must be attempted if the religion is to satisfy people who have a capacity for thought as well as for chortling in the dewy dawn and announcing the goodness of God through a lather of shaving-soap.

Nobody could be further than myself from sympathy with Roman Catholicism, because Catholicism works so busily to cover the austere ethical appeal of Christianity with bedizenments of myth and magic. But Roman Catholicism supplies, along with its relics of the saints and its calculated emotional drive at the superstitious side of human nature, a huge body of doctrine about which its educated members are prepared to

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

argue. It does not run about in a state of holy cachinnation, proclaiming with a broad grin that God is good and that's that. Groupism, however, seems to function happily in a mental fog; it substitutes salesmen's slogans for the discredited notion of doctrine. Not disdaining alliteration's artful aid, it proclaims that 'Christ suits, saves, and satisfies'. The vendor of a patent medicine could not say fairer than that. One of the despised, old-fashioned theologians might assist, amplify, and confirm the statement. But this is an age impatient of logic; it does not believe that First and Last things are capable of a reasoned exposition. The Groupists are determined to 'change lives' and stopping to think may be only a waste of time and trouble. What 'comes through' in Quiet Time may be termed 'Luminous Thought', but its intellectual content is not large. There is much urge and little argument. Here is some of a typical message of Guidance.

'Trust in the living God. He will give thee thy heart's desire. God does guide even to the picking of texts. Trust Him in all things. . . . Talk to Ray Purdy about this feeling of defeatism

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

and things being snarled up. God will direct it. Beware of cheap optimism. Take a college by storm. . . . A new trip south is right. Pray for money for it.'

It is obvious that the simplicities of Groupism are popular and effective. It is less exhausting for the undergraduate to be 'taken by storm' than to think things out. When Lord Morley was told that all good things come from the heart, he replied, 'Perhaps, but they should go round by the head.' I fancy that the zealous Buchmanites would not agree. They are Hearties.

The world at present is full of people who are trying to separate consciousness from its familiar niche in the unexciting cranium. The Lawrentians have their abdominal consciousness, even the phallic. The Groupists are men of heart, romantic hunters before the Lord, with Sin as the prey. Sin is a fine word. It hits the ear like a clap of thunder. It gives the ordinary man, who plods along in a routine of work and habit, something of a kick to be told that he is a miserable sinner. He begins to feel important. His life, which seemed so drab, is now a battle-ground where Christ with Satan

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

strives. It excites Herr Schmidt to discover that he is not just a little clerk in a little German town with a little income and no likelihood of being much else. It is Good News that he is a Noble Aryan, filled with the common splendour that attaches to the Aryan stock, commanded to ensure the rightful glories of the Aryan Destiny. In a similar way it excites the student to learn that he is a Miserable Sinner and that a shock troop of Life-changing Evangelists are fighting for his immortal soul. When I was a boy at school and recited daily that I was a miserable sinner, the confession was purely mechanical. It was 'chapel'. One muttered these things by rote, if one was paying any attention at all. The liturgy and litany repeated this 'miserable sinner' phrase so often that it became utterly meaningless. We were not miserable; and we were not, in any marked degree, sinners, just as we were not, in any degree at all, saints. We were just average boys. But, when in later life, with the chapel routine forgotten, the adult is suddenly confronted with the accusation of Sin, he may feel that the charge has added to his stature. Sin, Damnation, Salvation, these are brave notions and yield colour to a life

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

which otherwise consists of going to the office in the rain and returning in the same condition. Unless human nature suffers radical changes there will always be a warm welcome for accusations of Sin and for the preaching of simple means to Salvation. Such gospelling stirs the romantic impulse in the audience. To be snatched from the brink of Hell offers a more actual thrill than watching even the most sensational of films.

Thrills, too, may possess the enraptured addicts of a National Being or a Totalitarian State. The business of making democracy function may be dull, hard work; respecting the rights of your neighbours is less glamorous than recruiting him for the new glory – by force, if need be. All excitement wears off; the magic allure of flag and symbol may wither in time. But, for a while, the State Revival can provide as much ecstasy as a religious one. Both types of fanaticism are fundamentally orgiastic. The Christian Crusader romantically hunts a romantic bogey called Sin as the Hitlerite hunts down a wicked ogre called Non-Aryan. Both are anti-individualist, both glorify the mass. We must get away from separatism, say the Groupists, share our confessions, bear witness

## MYTHS AND MAGIC

in company, and hunt in packs. 'No lone-wolfing,' as Mr. Buchman puts it, using the simile of a beast ravening after its prey. We are Aryans or Gaels or This or That, cry the Totalitarians, we must be a pack, remain a pack, and drive out or destroy anybody who differs from the pack by owning a different kind of nose or a different kind of intelligence. Accordingly I suspect that our local aspirants to the dictatorship of a Totalitarian England may find some useful support among the hearty Life-changers of the Groupist Movement. For both parties believe in short cuts to secular or spiritual power; both are enemies of that self-sufficiency, that independence of mind and will which I take to be the most valuable of human characteristics. Both are romantics and appreciate the value of myth and magic. Both belong to the same School of No Thought.

## CHAPTER X

### THE SONGSTERS

IT can reasonably be asserted that to stress the romanticism of our time, as expressed in its addiction to dark forces and to anti-rational psychology or in its capitulation to the showman dictator with his anti-rational politics, is to leave out a considerable portion of the true picture. Of course no generalisation about any period can be true without reserve; the eighteenth century, so often called the Age of Reason, had its Man of Feeling, its sentimental comedy, its Gothic Revival. As Professor A. E. Housman has put it in his Leslie Stephen Lecture on 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', 'Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not. If it were, the eighteenth century would have been able to write it better. As matters actually stand, who are the English poets of that age in whom pre-eminently one can hear and

## THE SONGSTERS

recognise the true poetic accent emerging clearly from the contemporary dialect? These four: Collins, Christopher Smart, Cowper, and Blake.' All of these, he adds, were so far from being men of reason, as to be at times and, in part, insane. Labels for epochs are convenient; some, which have stuck by accident, are obviously gross mis-statements. Why should the 'nineties be for ever known as naughty because a few sad songsters got fuddled over their absinthe? Yet, while I naturally admit that classification lays but a rough hand on truth, I hope that I have given some proof of a recent and widespread revolt against reason and rational standards in taste, conduct, politics, and philosophy.

At the same time it is crystal clear that rationality has advanced in certain spheres in which our forefathers scarcely conceived of its existence. In architecture, for example, construction for use has blessedly succeeded the senseless titivations of the Victorian mode. Bogus baronial is dead; retired City gentlemen no longer aspire to sham-Gothic mansions with loop-hole windows and dreaming spires. The prosperous Victorian built solidly; but he had to bedizen; not an article from mantelpiece



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

to roof could be left to look after itself; everything had knobs on. We substitute the simple and severely functional building for the knobby and the frilled; we design inhabitable houses instead of suburban fortresses soaring to their puny and pretentious turrets. We pursue what light and air our climate offers instead of gloomily averting these intruders on a gentlemanly gloom. Furniture has been functionally simplified; bareness and spareness, in some cases excessive, have superseded the riot of knick-knackery without which no Victorian householder could feel himself established as a man of property and decorum. Indeed, it may well be claimed that in these matters we have pressed the rational so far that reason has lost all sweetness and, in its pursuit of utility, runs to starkness; those with a sweet tooth in architectural matters may complain excessively that it is never jam to-day, but always jam-factory. Whether nudism is a romantic or a rational pursuit, I forbear to discuss; but plainly the general conduct of the race in its pursuit of leisure is a great deal more reasonable than it used to be. We have shed some ridiculous taboos; we have established valuable liberties; we have applied

## THE SONGSTERS

intelligent toleration instead of nervous moral apprehension to the conduct of the young adult in whom the sap of life is rising.

So far, so good. But one of the curious habits of our time is to cultivate logic exactly where it is not wanted, namely, in poetry. It is surely some proof of the extraordinary confusion of the adolescent mind that, having sunk itself in a psychology which denies the validity of mind, it should immediately import mind, or a species of mind, into an exercise whose traditional and excellent purpose is to strike at feeling. If poets were ever the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, then the less poets they. We do not turn to Shakespeare for his politics or to Milton for a moral code. Their gifts are otherwise. Yet Professor Housman's assertion, already quoted, 'Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not' would be furiously denied in the rising songsters of to-day. In their very interesting *Survey of Modernist Poetry* Miss Laura Riding and Mr. Robert Graves use one remarkable and significant phrase. Having pounded Mr. Drinkwater for giving us 'the decayed flesh of poetry, the deteriorated sentimental part', they proceed to describe the modern reader as confining

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

himself to 'the hard matter-of-fact skeleton of poetic logic'. The poetry of our time, it seems, must resemble the furniture which is in fashion and be steely stuff, a bare-boned framework for the contemporary idea. Logic is admirable, but nothing is admirable out of its place and why should logic invade the lyric art? If people choose to write out spasmodic contributions to the theory of knowledge and call them poetry, despite a complete absence of poetic form, that is their own affair. Nobody need mark them. What is extremely impertinent and aggravating is their habit of announcing that this is Living Poetry and that all else is Dead Matter, Victorian putrefaction, or Early Georgian carrion.

Miss Riding and Mr. Graves cite, as the contrast to poor dead Drinkwater, a poem to a steam-roller – so vital a theme! – composed by Miss Marianne Moore, which contains the following lines:

'Were not "impersonal judgment in æsthetic matters  
a physical impossibility", you  
might fairly achieve  
it. As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive  
of one's attending you, but to question  
the congruency of the compliment is vain, if it exists.'  
Why this piece of prose should be printed with

## THE SONGSTERS

the lineal demarcations of poetry, only the author knows; can it be a consciousness that her prose-style is appalling and may be disguised by the charming assumption that it is really verse? However that may be, Miss Riding and Mr. Graves have been deeply impressed by Miss Moore and her steam-roller. 'The reader will not sympathise,' they admit, 'with the prose quotation in the above poem, which its author thought necessary as the documentary justification of her tirade, or appreciate the logical application of butterflies; a butterfly being the mathematical complement to a steam-roller and, as a metaphorical complement, suggesting the extreme, unrelieved dullness of the steam-roller mind that has no possible complement, even in metaphor.' The reader supposed by the authors is an ordinary jackass; but, if he fails to sympathise with Miss Moore, he may surely have the sympathy of others not commonly deemed wholly asinine. But the interesting and astonishing point is the application to a supposed lyric of phrases that would, in less advanced times, have been left in the law-court or in the lecture-notes scribbled during an address on Relativity in Metaphysic. 'Documentary justification',

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

'logical application', 'mathematical complement'. There are some painters who consider that a work of art will certainly be achieved by covering canvas with a design suggesting that a proposition of Euclid has collided with a sky-scraper. In this case the principle appears to be the same. Let a proposition in logic collide with a steam-roller and the answer is the Pure Essence of Poesy. Again Senator W. B. Yeats has – or so I understand from an article in *New Verse*, October, 1933 – thus described the prelude to poetry favoured by Mr. Ezra Pound.

'He has scribbled on the back of an envelope certain sets of letters that represent emotions or archetypal events – I cannot find any adequate definition – A B C D and then J K L M, and then each set of letters repeated, and then A B C D inverted and this repeated, and then a new element X Y Z, then certain letters that never recur and then all sorts of combinations of X Y Z and J K L M and A B C D and D C B A and all set whirling together.'

We can hardly call that an activity of Pure Reason.

## THE SONGSTERS

But, whatever it is, it has certainly nothing to do with the old 'dead' forms of inspiration. Once more it seems to be very like Euclid in collision.

In the same article from which I quote this remarkable description of the Prophet Ezra at large among the alphabet, his P's and Q's in a fine frenzy rolling, there is a criticism of Mr. Pound in his role of Poet Erudite. The writer, Mr. Geoffrey Grigson, points out that Mr. Pound uses 'quotations and translations and reminiscence and single words which are often meant to convey a large burden outside themselves'. This is one of Mr. T. S. Eliot's antics, as readers of *The Waste-land* have somewhat painfully discovered. Continues Mr. Grigson,

'To be sure of his pattern from beginning to end of these XXX Cantos, one must be able to catch every thin, delicate shaving of suggestion which Mr. Pound employs. Describing Helen, for example, in Canto II, Mr. Pound says that she

has the face of a God  
And the voice of Schœney's daughters.

Schœney is Schœnus, father of Atalanta, a fact

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

which five seconds with Lemprière will discover. But why Schœney? The answer is that Golding, in his translation of the eighth book of the *Metamorphoses*, describes

“Atalant, a goodly Ladie one  
of Schœneyes daughters”

and that Mr. Pound intends another cultural link.’

Mr. Pound, who has obligingly reprinted some of these Cantos in his own *Active Anthology*, has, with equal kindness, supplied his own notes. So you can, if you are feeling as active as the Anthology, run straight to a Latin version of the *Odyssey* by Andreas Divus (1538), in order to discover whether Mr. Pound has got his references correct. On the other hand, it is possible that the jackass reader of modern verse, visualised by Miss Riding and Mr. Graves, will not want to do any such running. And why should he? Why, too, should he grub about *The Waste-land* in order to root up the dubious truffles of Mr. Eliot’s scholarship. Mr. Eliot, like Mr. Pound, supplies notes, just as the setters of crossword puzzles tell

## THE SONGSTERS

you the following week whence this or that quotation was derived. But why compose poetry as if it were a crossword puzzle? Because, we are told, the writer wants to emphasise the continuity of culture. That is a common explanation of the 'Where did that one come from?' poetry. A pleasing thought, especially when we learn from the Pound-Eliot apologists (a) That all past poetry is dead matter (b) That their heroes are notably cultural because they impose chunks of this carion in their own so active, so vital composition. The application of Pure Reason to Pure Poetry would never, I think, be a great asset to the Muse. The trouble in the present case is that the Friends of Reason seem to possess as much faculty for logic as Mr. Lawrence's orgiastic and belly-conscious Indians. The poems are confusion; the defence confusion's masterpiece.

It is the nature of all radicals to hate one another for their insufficient radicalism. After studying Mr. Pound's introduction to his *Active Anthology* I gather that Mr. Pound is vexed with Mr. Eliot. Mr. Leavis, the Cambridge Guide to New Verse and Hammer of all the established reputations, expressed astonishment with Mr. Eliot



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

on discovering that he was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, which means association with all the damned, even with Mr. Hugh Walpole. Mr. Eliot, on the other hand, is still patient with Mr. Pound, but then he is, in this case, somewhat easy to please, if the following remarks about Mr. Pound's Cantos signify anything.

'As for the meaning of the Cantos, that never worries me, and I do not believe that I care. I know that Mr. Pound has a scheme and a kind of philosophy; it is quite enough for me that he thinks he knows what he is doing.'

And now, before we return to Miss Riding and Mr. Graves for further instruction in Living Verse, let us consider a few of Mr. Pound's notions of the Poetry that is Active. In his preface to *Active Anthology* he announces that 'Mr. Bunting probably seems reactionary to most of the other contributors'. Eagerly we turn to Mr. Bunting, experiencing a wild surmise that he may have disgraced himself by writing a sonnet to a skylark or burst into mere bourgeois rhyme at the sight

of the year's first crocus. But here is a typical note of the Bunting in full song.

'They say Etna  
belches as much poison  
as Duisburg's pudenda  
a littering sow  
helpless in the railroad ditch.

The Muses Ergot and Appiol,  
Mr. Reader.  
Mr. Reader,  
the Muses Ergot and Appiol.  
What violence or fraud  
shall we record?

Popone or Kreuger?  
A skipper of the Middle Passage  
stinkproof and dead  
with a hundred and seventy slaves  
damaged in transit  
for Jamaica?

**So that is reaction!**

Progress in poesy is presumably represented by Mr. E. E. Cummings or Mr. e. e. cuMMinGs, or however he spells it when he is heavily aflame with inspiration. Here is a fragment from *Fragments from Eimi*. It is, apparently, about

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

a man standing in a square in Russia expecting rain.

‘while not quite clutching “yool luv um” detective stories pumps 1 shrugging much more than middleaged ghost in babyclothes (and who What who What Name who O who wickedly sneerfrowning “nyez neyeoo”)? – again while something while someone with skin like a drowned angleworm bats now madly with an old straw hatless that hanged (rustily) high unbell with clongclingclungs . . . and out of the nether dark sprouts 1 nonface (who What who What Name who O who You Mean The Cripple who frown-sneering wickedly Down and To Your Right now disappears?)

– now do we further angleworm groping and the I halt before unshut shutness before this compromising 1 bespectacled oldyoung hideous nonman (who What who What Name who sneerfrowning wickedly “nyez neyeoo”)?’

This is not all my-Eimi; there is plenty more. It should be added, that this contribution to letters

## THE SONGSTERS

occurs in an Anthology on whose cover the publishers, Messrs. Faber and Faber, announce in all solemnity, 'In this volume he (Mr. Pound) presents an assortment of writers, mostly ill-known in this country, in whose verse a development appears or in some instances we may say "still appears" to be taking place, in distinction from contemporary poets in whose work Mr. Pound finds no such activity or further development.'

Ill-known in this country! Oh barbarous Albion! Will these English never be ashamed of their own ignorance? One may permissibly wonder how well-known are these mighty minstrels in their own terrain and what, in fact, is that happy land. I can hardly think that Columbia hails them Hitler-wise with a forest of extended right arms. It is just possible that when they enter a certain café in Montparnasse some of the dome-browed intelligents order another drink to celebrate the high occasion. At any rate those who require to know more of Mr. Pound's Active Boys, the Shock Troops of the Muse, can have 255 pages of the high-powered stuff for 7s. 6d. in English money. If that does not quench the appetite they can try *New Verse*, which erupts at sixpence a

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

time every two months from a nicely chosen address in Keat's Grove, Hampstead. ('Where Keats heard the nightingale, you know.') The first Philomel in the choir I take to be Mr. David Gascoigne, of whose Ode 'And the Seventh Dream is the Dream of Isis', contains the following contribution to the Up-and-Coming Culture.

'she was standing at the window clothed only in a  
ribbon  
she was burning the eyes of snails in a candle  
she was eating the excrement of dogs and horses  
she was writing a letter to the president of france  
the edges of leaves must be examined through micro-  
scopes  
in order to see the stains made by dying flies  
at the other end of the tube is a woman bathing her  
husband  
and a box of newspapers covered with handwriting  
when an angel writes the word TOBACCO across the  
sky  
the sea becomes covered with patches of dandruff  
the trunks of trees burst open to release streams of milk  
little girls stick photographs of genitals to the windows  
of their homes'

One may as well stop there as anywhere else, because this is a non-stop species of poem. Punctuation is so bourgeois and capital letters are as dead as Drinkwater.

## THE SONGSTERS

At this point the reader may reasonably observe that he does not see much appeal to reason in these goings-on. True, but the type of poetry at the moment in question appeals to nothing in human sense and sentiment. It is fair, however, to say that a great deal of modernist poetry does endeavour to conduct an argument and to keep emotion at arm's length. As the Riding-Graves book says of Miss Marianne Moore 'she conveys her meaning as dryly and unfeelingly as a school-mistress would explain a mathematical problem'. Miss Moore, it should be added, is included by Mr. Pound among the Activists. To be dry, unfeeling, mathematical, that is the aim – or one of them.

It does not, on the face of it, appear to be an exacting ambition. By such standards the average school text-book is an anthology in itself and Euclid a laureate. It is understandable that the Very Modern should dislike what is ordinarily known as poetry, just as others dislike cricket or cod liver oil. What I cannot understand is why they are so cantankerous about it. People who dislike cricket or cod's liver peaceably avoid these things. They do not go into the street and play

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

with a steel bar for bat and an old kettle as the ball, crying 'This is the Real, Active Cricket. All that stuff at Lord's is the corpse of cricket.' But this is exactly what the Very Modern Poets do. They write something which bears no relation to any sort of poetry and then noisily assert that this is the only real poetry and that all the other fellows are Down among the Dead Men. I would respect this judgment more if they declined to use the word poetry at all. Let them stop cutting up their prose into segments that give an outer semblance of attempted poetry. Let them say that poetry died when the motor car came in and that there shall be no more trifling with this deplorable and outworn art. Let them proclaim spasmodic prose as the only voice which can articulate the opinions of the rising generation. That, though foolish, would at least be consistently foolish. What is so tiresome is their insistence on using the title when they kill the thing. A Commissar who murders a king does at least forbear to wear a crown and call himself a Little Father. That form of idiocy is monopolised by the lads and lasses of the Active Group.

The emotional criterion of poetry was over-

## THE SONGSTERS

stated by Professor Housman in his famous lecture. 'Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not', is a phrase which obviously needs qualification. It certainly does not divorce poetry from meaning, but it too rigidly separates heart and brain. None the less the ordinary reader of poetry – and, since there are not a great many people who read poetry without scholastic compulsion, the ordinary reader is an extraordinary person – probably agrees with the Housman test of emotional response.

Either the poet rings the bell or he does not. 'I think that to transfuse emotion – not to transmit thought, but to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer – is the peculiar function of poetry.' We recognise poetry by physical occurrence. Housman quotes Eliphaz the Temanite; 'A spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up.' The body is the arbiter; there are, as Mr. Tappertit would say, 'vibrations'. Sometimes it is perilous to be thus set a-shivering. 'Experience has taught me,' Housman continues, 'when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act.'



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

He also attributes to the power of poetry watery eyes, a constriction of the throat, and a stabbing sensation in the pit of the stomach.

Few of us, I suppose, are quite so powerfully vibrated as a Housman; we might even manage to shave with a book of poetry on the dressing table. At the same time he, with his own genius, has made it difficult not to vibrate physically as he drops his words upon our senses.

'Could man be drunk for ever  
With liquor, love, or fights,  
Lief should I rise at morning  
And lief lie down of nights.

But men at whiles are sober  
And think by fits and starts  
And, if they think, they fasten  
Their hands upon their hearts.'

One shudders for the state of the Housman epidermis should he remember his own poetry with razor in hand. The Modernist would simply scream out his parrot-cry about Dead Stuff. 'Lief' is an old word; you do not say in a public-house 'Lief would I have a pint of bitter'; therefore the word must not occur in any Active Poem. The Activist would, I suppose, argue that Housman

## THE SONGSTERS

is making an intellectual judgment on the desirability of escape. This ought to be stated with the 'hard matter-of-fact skeleton of poetic logic' or 'as dryly and unfeelingly as a schoolmistress would explain a mathematical problem'. It must be done, too, in the language used by a liquorish, lecherous, combative man. Perhaps the Activist version would run something like this. Mr. Pound, at any rate, has my full permission to use it in his next posy of contemporary flowers.

                                  booze  
that's O.K.  
                                  whose booze?  
                                  oozy booze  
kiddo I'm bottled  
                                  grand  
dames and janes and socks  
on the jaw  
                                  grand  
brain stabs  
belly vomits mind-stuff  
                                  lousy  
O gemme a woman gemme booze  
                                  shucks.

That fulfils all the canons of poesy as practised by the Shock Troops; perhaps the typography is inadequate. A few capital letters in the middle

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

of the words might assist the 'matter-of-fact skeleton of poetic logic'. There might be some high rational significance in writing 'boOze' or 'vOmits'. Possibly the question-mark after the second 'booze' is a trifle old-world.

Is it worth arguing, even by way of jest, with all this theory of a dry, unfeeling statement? Hardly, but it is worth asserting that the use of words, in certain sequences and rhythms, with or without rhyme but certainly with associations, has been practised since civilisation began in order to produce emotional effect or vibration, as Housman would say. It is now assumed that, owing to some sudden, undefined, and unexplained metamorphosis in the condition of mankind, this process no longer works and that the generally acknowledged examples of its power to give pleasure are foul remnants of decomposing carrion. Such an attitude surely demands support in fact, but none is forthcoming. Miss Riding and Mr. Graves simply announce that 'from the 'eighties onward the writing of real poetry has been postponed by an increasing succession of such dead movements'. They cite the playful French forms popularised by Austin Dobson,

## THE SONGSTERS

Arthur Symons, and Sir Edmund Gosse. Then there was 'the wickedness movement' of the 'nineties, then a lull, then Georgianism, then Imagism. All dead. No life at all until Mr. E. E. Cummings sets activity moving. This crude dismissal supposes that all poets are bits of 'a movement' and have no individual existence and that all poems can be fitted into categories and so put into appropriate places in the mortuary or museum dedicated to the relics of so-called poetical writing. An absurd supposition. But not even that is so absurd as the notion that the whole output of a generation obediently dies when the coroner says 'Lie down. What I call a corpse, is a corpse.'

There is only one sure test of life in poetry and no proof at all of certain death. The same test is true of any art or any idea. Can it survive or reappear in the memories and affections of men? Not of all men; democratic verdicts are not wanted here. The criterion of vitality rests with those who read poetry because they like it and not for reasons of scholastic compulsion, not for examination purposes or to satisfy any phase of mental snobbery. These readers may reject as 'out of touch' a particular kind of poetic expression.

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

But their rejection has no final validity. Even what now seems most certain of oblivion may come back. I find no sort of satisfaction in the Muse of Messrs. Bunting and Cummings, but I am not so silly as to call it dead. For all I know the appetite for the poetry which I do like may suddenly dwindle from the general favour. America may celebrate the Ezra Pound Centenary with all flags to the mast and all professors on the dais. I deem it unlikely, but that is no reason for throwing tombstones at what I do not like. It is sufficiently obvious that the history of taste, especially of poetic taste, is a history of resurrections. Now a Blake, now a Donne emerges as the rediscovered hero. Many of the Modernists have pulled out Gerard Manley Hopkins as the one brand to be saved from their high-heaped pyre of the mid-Victorian singers; his concentration on 'poetic logic' is just their cup of tea. These resurrections are partly contrived by the new movement of academic authority on the Right or by a new war-cry of the Storm Troopers on the Left. But that will not restore a reputation. There must be a more general alteration of reader's habit. These alterations occur. The forgotten is

## THE SONGSTERS

remembered and revisited. Miss Riding and Mr. Graves, calmly handing out death-certificates to whole periods at a time, are really very innocent creatures; you may, if you choose, prefer to call them impudent.

Tricks of speech may be more nearly mortal, but even of those we cannot predict the end. There were some pomposities of artifice which now seem so oppressive that nothing could re-introduce them to the poet's workshop. Housman quotes the description of St. Mary Magdalene's eyes,

'Two walking baths, two weeping motions,  
Portable and compendious oceans.'

The label of poetry, he drily adds, is not here appropriate. But at the time of composition the author was not the only one to consider this the right way to write. The truth of the matter is that every school of thought or expression develops modes which, in the end, outlive their utility; the weaker members or the latecomers pick up the tricks without the substance or the flame. They wear the Old School Tie and admirers of the school are cozened into believing that they are really jolly good fellows, fully meriting their

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

colours. Stephen Phillips, with his facility for turning out a pleasing ripple of Tennysonian echoes, was a case in point; he was immediately acclaimed with the most lavish and concerted praise. Such a poem as 'Marpessa', which was a mere exercise in the Victorian iambic style at its flabbiest, became enormously popular with the gift-book public, but this public had the highest critical authority for their faith. Soon after it was realised that Phillips had nothing to say; he was simply wearing the Old School Tie with an air and a grace. Unreasonably promoted, he was unkindly dropped. Because that sort of thing happens, because modes of composition outlive their vogue and are used by inferior poets as a shortcut to poetic reputation, what earthly reason have we for passing a verdict of death by natural causes on a myriad forms of writing which dared to anticipate the arrival of the omniscient Ezra?

The Modernists have doubtless observed that poetic diction easily becomes a bad habit and that reformers must from time to time insist on sweeping away the old modes of speech and substituting fresh ones. The occurrence is as old as Athens; Euripides insisted on simplifying the grandiose

## THE SONGSTERS

vocabulary of his predecessors, just as Wordsworth rebelled against the rhetorical and ornate convention of the eighteenth century. The Modernists have a case against the Phillipsian usage of verbal gambits that were fresh enough when Tennyson began. Undoubtedly there was a way of writing which could easily establish poetry's counterfeit; there was 'a lingo' and Housman quotes as a type of 'lingo' favourite, full of 'sad and faded prettiness' Andrew Lang's well-known Sonnet on the *Odyssey* with its 'low lutes of love'. The later eighteenth century had, in exactly the same way, formalised the once fresh conceits of the period's early songsters. Any gentleman could turn out a neat thing about Chloe and rapture. The perils of 'lingo' are eternal; so are the perils of a 'hang-over' from a period of essential inspiration. Agreed. Something must be done for freshness. But why abolish a whole vocabulary, why banish a whole technique of a long-established craft, why assert, that because of some flabbiness, the whole body must be destroyed? The enemies of the poetic 'lingo' have not destroyed 'lingo'; they have substituted their own, which happens to be that of the street.



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

Silence 'the low lutes of love' if you like; but why pretend that a mechanical orchestra of tongs and bones, penny whistles and dirty talk is not equally a conventional instrument? It is fashionable to suppose that poetry is guaranteed by a violent flight from the old jargon. But poetry is like the weather; nobody in his senses will guarantee it.

This criticism of Modern Verse has, admittedly, associated groups of rebels who are probably antagonistic and are certainly widely separated in their method. No doubt Mr. Day Lewis disapproves of Mr. Cummings and Mr. W. H. Auden, another recent favourite, actually uses the sonnet-form. But what I would commit to the flames is not particular poetry but a particular principle, the childish belief that the way to be a poet is to be unlike all other poets, even if that unlikeness can only be achieved by cutting conversational prose into strips and substituting bawdy talk for the 'lingo' of beauty. We are tediously, eternally told that a new age must find new means of expression. More important is it that a new age must find something new, intelligent, and intelligible to say. When the message is there, the means will look after themselves. At

## THE SONGSTERS

present we have plenty of raucous means and no discoverable message. We were always being told about the wonderful things Youth was going to do to a world that had been savaged by the Seniors. Youth's chief performance is the abolition of reason in politics and the introduction of 'a hard poetic logic' into poetry. Coloured shirts, but no coloured language. At this point I revert to the simplicities of Housmanic vibrations, however bourgeois, however Victorian. 'The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.' That is better, I think, than the unspontaneous overflow of muddled thoughts. But powerful feelings are so obvious! Indeed, they are. And nobody will ever be a poet who is not content to be obvious. Presumably those so nicely depicted by Mr. Humbert Wolfe,

'Who from the classrooms by the dragged Cam  
With lecturers to steer their motor-pram'

emerge to impress us with new signatures and brave inventions, hold otherwise. For them, no doubt, the lyrics of a Shakespeare or a Burns, being obvious and also being music, are of no interest. And as for vibrations, how ineffably

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

Victorian! Your up-to-date poet could shave with one hand and write his cantos with the other. But no, he would not write them: pens, like punctuation are so old-fashioned: he would rather yield his dithyramb to the dictaphone, a suitable vessel for the 'hard skeleton of poetic logic'.

## CHAPTER XI

### THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE

CONTEMPORARY taste, accordingly, is rationalistic where romantic values are natural and romantic where reason demands to be upheld. This much valid criticism lies against the nineteenth-century's cult of reason—that it was absurdly optimistic. The nineteenth century began with an almost romantic prostration before the Goddess of Reason, in whose temple Godwin, Shelley, and their associates had so hopefully worshipped. Godwin believed in the infinite malleability of man; hammer this stuff of humanity with education and all would immediately be well. 'Nature,' he announced with a curious ignorance of common fact, 'never made a dunce.' Equality of status would make the timid brave; equality of learning would make the fool wise. Let society but spread the light and all would be

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

illuminated. The doctrine of Human Perfectibility was enthusiastically preached by men who were convinced of its truth. One had but to remove certain barriers to progress, of which ignorance was the worst, in order to see humanity magnificently and immediately arise in a glory of virtue, charity, and omniscience. It was all so simple. Appeal to reason and reason would respond.

Although the French Revolution slew so many and liberated so few, the human problem was still all so simple when Victor Hugo added his clamorous voice to the faith in Reasonable Man resurgent from the abyss of degradation. It is true that Hugo, unlike Godwin, asked for time. But his demand was certainly moderate.

‘Give time for the realisation of the acme of social salvation – gratuitous and compulsory education. How long will it take? A quarter of a century; and then imagine the incalculable sum of intellectual development. . . . Look! raise your eyes! the supreme epic is accomplished. The legions of light drive backward the hordes of flame.’

## THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE

Jeremy Bentham, a typically optimistic radical of the English school and unswervingly confident in the power of the reasoning mind to know its own good and pursue it, expressed a desire that he might revisit the world a century after his death in order to see the triumph of liberty and enlightenment which would result from the universal adoption of Utilitarian principles and democratic practice. It was well for Jeremy's shade that it could not keep this appointment; at least not as far as we are aware. For on its return to earth in 1932 it would have seen mainly the wreckage of past wars and the terrified preparation for new ones, romantic gentry in partisan shirts 'trampling on the stinking corpse of freedom,' and a strong conviction in intellectual circles that intelligence is useless, that instinct is its far superior guide, and that the contorting negro is the example of human conduct and the model of human wisdom. The nineteenth century regarded the individual as potentially capable of intelligent choice; the twentieth increasingly ridicules the possibility or the value of self-government and points to submission in the Totalitarian State as the natural goal of the human body, mind, and spirit.

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

Even those who were not absurdly, romantically, confident in the way of Godwin and of Victor Hugo were none the less far too sanguine. My own education certainly left with me the impression that the classical ideals of liberty and democracy would somehow and successfully be applied to the huge nation-states of to-day. One's duty was to vote for the Liberal Party (later on it was the Labour Party), support all measures of educational expansion, distribute book-learning with the vote and grant self-government to the turbulent Gael; then the great machine of liberation, which had been so momentarily cranked up during the nineteenth century, would jog peacefully along through the still more enlightened decades of the twentieth. Freedom would broaden down from precedent to precedent (in America from President to President) and, if Universal Benevolence did not arrive with that lightning speed prophesied by the early radicals, it would certainly creep over the horizon, so long as the Progressive Spirits continued gospelling for the right, voting on the Left, smashing the House of Lords, and entrusting our destinies to smart young Liberal barristers who had learned their

## THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE

politics in a pleasant confusion of Athenian History and University Debating Societies. There were, it is true, the more advanced democrats who had a little lost faith in those pocket-Asquiths from Balliol or from King's and regarded as worthier recipients of faith and votes the inevitable check-weighman from the Yorkshire coal-field who was then the ideal of the Youth Movement in academic places. Perhaps the good Yorkshireman did not know a great deal, but Mr. and Mrs. Webb would hold his horny hand and feed his uninstructed mind.

It was a simple faith and it fell. It had to confront a world-economy ravaged by a war for which it was not responsible, on whose calamitous results it could not calculate. There was one last burst of optimism; the fourteen-pointed antlers of President Wilson were the emblem of the new hope and, when they were transported to Paris, we could still believe. Thrones collapsed; republics abounded. Hope, though a little nervous of Moscow, doffed its hat to Vienna and Weimar. Human perfectibility no longer lit the sky and it did seem a little hard on the pocket-Asquiths that the check-weighmen were increasingly



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

beginning to elbow them out of the way. These cleverly planned careers at the Bar and on the Front Bench were not coming right. Still, education was being laid-on like gas and water and the new democracy poured out its wages on innumerable guide-books to the New Jerusalem.

Then the falling pebbles of disenchantment gathered in numbers and velocity. The avalanche began; the Liberal stars ran into a cloud at the polls or were hurtled into other courses. Their worshippers, instead of reading about their dialectical triumphs on the Front Bench, could hear them in person, brightly explaining to members of the League of Nations Union in lecture-rooms, at the far end of somewhat dismal tram-lines, that headway was somehow being achieved, that the Reign of Reason and of Law was yet in the making, and that a little more prudent use of the ballot would put things right. Human Perfectibility had certainly come down in the world (rather like the pocket-Asquiths) when it reached the end of those tram-lines and meanwhile the history of Europe was being shaped on lines by no means approved on the progressive benches of University Unions. Dictation suddenly became

## THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE

the better part of politics. Fists, veiled or mailed, according to the local circumstances, began to predominate over the excellent resolutions (passed *nem. con*) of the progressively minded few. It was rumoured that, despite the League of Nations Union, Europe was really run by Sir Basil Zaharoff, though nobody quite knew why. It was perfectly apparent that Russia was run by Lenin and his kind, Italy by Mussolini, Hungary by Horthy, England and France by Poincaré, and the intellectual firmament by any one who would say that democracy was a faded nineteenth-century notion. It needed only another year or two for Germany to realise that the whole Aryan world was in the treacherous grip of Semitic scholars and to take punitive steps against so notorious a scandal. The recourse to arson and exile as a defence against scholarship had at least one attractive side to it, namely, the German belief that knowledge and literature may actually bear some influence on human society. This, indeed, is to pay an unusual compliment to authorship. To burn books is, in a sense, to believe in them. It is more complimentary to commit a book to the flames than to commit it to the void of total

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

neglect. When the British Obscurantists begin to specialise in bonfires, it will be a sign of considerable promise for the status and the future of English Letters.

So Sweet Reason, whose disciples might well have been scolded for excess of faith, was thrown to the outer darkness, when it was not honoured with the flames. Like the Liberal Party in most countries where Liberalism had once held some dominion over the forum, it went out of fashion and out of office. It was deemed that the Mind had let man down and that a new sovereign over the human faculties must be discovered. So D. H. Lawrence went chasing the seat of consciousness into the lower parts of the body or cried up the Blood against the Brain. Youth was invited to back its red corpuscles against its grey matter. Psycho-analysts chivvied the Psyche into the most curious and least savoury corners. Educational Reformers preached the divinity of instinct, proclaimed the first function of the school to be the abolition of lessons, and invented a technique of Not-Teaching the New Unlearning. The hue and cry against tradition was in full swing and the blessed word 'Disintegration' was much upon

## THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE

the lips of the Advanced. There had been a civilised tradition of finding rhythmical phrase for spontaneous emotion. Poetry, as the old gaffers called it. Away with such decaying offal! Disintegrate, dismember, destroy. There had been a certain measure of civilised agreement about the relation of form to matter, some canons of proportion, a reasoned philosophy of beauty. But it was attached to the classical curriculum; it smacked of Grecian urns and Olympic deities, graces, nymphs, and other guide-book prettiness, mere Parthenon stuff. Disintegrate again! Up with the Primitive. Bow down to King Congo. Bow, bow, ye sopho-moric classes! Set the baboon a-grinning on the plinth of vanished naiads. The Grecian mode was the mirrored vision of an Age of Reason; the new cult of unreason must have its fiercer arts, distorted masses, primitive violence, gods of the swamp and slime.

If the Primitive movement had restated a belief in a Golden Age, in which man was more peaceable and neighbourly than ever before, it would have deserved some attention. Most races of men have had their vision of a vanished glory and modern anthropology does give the dream some

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

confirmation by its research into the life of unorganised societies. Their method of life does offer a certain commendable distinction from the scramble of greed and cruelty which the first conquerors let loose upon the world, once Saturn's smiling kingdom, now the prey of tribal warlords, groping their way over the harried villages to the new realities of property and power. For a historical, or rather for a prehistorical, cult of the Noble Savage there was a case and not a case approved by hazy theorists only, but grounded on hard fact in the writings of such scholars as Dr. Elliot Smith. But for a twentieth-century cult of the orgiastic coon there was no excuse but vulgarity of temper and shallowness of mind. Our New Primitives dote upon the savage, not because of a lost nobility, but because of a present ignobility. The Lawrentians, for instance, scan the horizon for that type of humanity which has least trace of the intellectual tradition, least human dignity, 'eyes sightless, mouth speechless' and bring the prize home to Bloomsbury with screams of joy. Homo Insipiens! Glory to man in his lowest, for he is the triumph of time.

So we were submerged in the new pessimism

## THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE

of disintegration, smothered in the chaos of cacophonous poetry, smash-and-grab politics, amorphous sculpture, and instinctive philosophy with its preposterous outfit of sexual hallucinations and sexual symbols. The Exodus from Intelligence was well under way. Here was the Promised Land, flowing with Freud and Lawrence, Lady Chatterly its Lady Bountiful. The crusade for Caliban was established. 'Young man,' said a Liberal statesman to an idealist worshipping at his feet, 'never join crusades!' Shrewd advice, for a campaign to upset values deemed sentimental so easily becomes itself a sentimental journey. All that has happened has been the substitution of ugly idols for pretty ones. A man can dote just as absurdly over a slug as over a skylark. One sentimentality dithers about fairies, another is prostrate before ogres. The red lamp of unchastity can be as readily and stupidly romanticised as the white taper of the virgin's cell. Arcadian raptures are not improved by the substitution of pastoral revelations in the modern style of bestiality. One school sees a natural saint in every pair of corduroys; the other spies only a hind let loose among the more luscious pastures of unnatural

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

self-indulgence. The impulse from a vernal wood creates neither Wordsworthian morals nor the goatish horrors assigned by Mr. T. F. Powys to the rustic scene. The one is as far gone in romanticism as the other. The dark gods are in fashion. But if the modern Corinna must go a-maying with the lending library's assistance, she may as well do it in the Vale of the Pixies as on Hagworm Hill, since neither happens to exist.

We can gladly admit our release from certain excesses of sentimental self-indulgence. There is less tendency among modern parents to force fairies down their children's throats. The present loathing of what may be loosely called 'Barrieism' may be taken as a sign of virtue without incivility to the author and dramatist whose technical capacity abides nobody's question. He spoke for an age that sentimentalised gentleness instead of violence, preferred the odd to the outrageous, and threw a kiss to Cinderella instead of grovelling before Mumbo-Jumbo. At present it may seem that fairies have no future outside of Pantomime, but nothing is more certain than that they will pop up again. The children who have had this kind of whimsy aseptically scoured from their bleak new

## THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE

world will react in due course to favour more colourful and elvish notions. It is as silly to deny fairies as to ram them eternally into the childish fancy. These things go by turns. There used, for instance, to be an Edwardian quality called 'charm' which has now been abolished in favour of 'Sex Appeal' or, more succinctly, 'It'. (Those ignorant of 'charm' can learn all about it by watching one of our senior actresses press the button of her technique and flood the stage with that mechanic sweetness as easily as the electrician floods it with light.) But charm, like the fairies, will get another innings. Meanwhile an age which has shaken 'charm' off its sleeve is not free of the emotional flabbiness which charm evoked. Sentimentality is self-indulgence in unspontaneous or unmerited emotion and it is as easy to enjoy this exercise over the sour dish as over the sweet, over the hideous and gross as over the chaste and delicate. One man dotes on the dragon-fly, the other on the dung-beetle. Both, if they are cossetting their feelings, are sentimentalists.

The people who are romanticising abstractions such as the Noble Aryan or the Noble Gael, blithering about Dark Gods and Savage Messiahs,



## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

abolishing the judgment of the brain to assert the impulse of the blood, idealising unchastity as their parents idealised chastity, and generally disintegrating the received culture of their time, may attach to themselves the sympathy which normally attends an insurrection. But, if Old Minds are none the better for being old, New Voices are none the more truthful for being new. Youth Movements are not to be immediately acclaimed because they are young, but to be judged by the direction in which they move. This particular movement seems to have no guidance beyond a hazy romanticism and a rooted distrust of reason. Call it a Hunger March of those who found the old diet too sad for the stomach and the liberal shepherd an unhelpful pastor. But Hunger Marches, however noble the intention, only proceed to Bow Street or carry a few broken heads into the accident ward. And this one is not even a march; it is a ramble. Its wayward participants have random slogans in plenty, but no common and continuing purpose. The poets are typical; at one moment they are being more traditional than a lexicon, at another they are screaming about disintegration and voting everybody dead who lived a year before

## THOUGHTS BY THE FIRESIDE

themselves. There is no background of principle. I submit that their fathers' philosophy may have been inadequate; either its liberalism was too optimistic to fit the facts of social life or its conservatism was too dull to suit the needs of more active minds and generous tempers. (I am not, of course, using these words with any party reference.) But at least the doctrine cohered; there was a scheme of values; there was matter for assessment and for argument. But, when a young man suddenly brandishes a volume of D. H. Lawrence and announces that the brain is always wrong and the blood is always right, what answer can be made? It is no use arguing with the fellow, because that is an activity of the decrepit and discredited brain. He dictates, doubtless from the depth of that divine Lawrentian consciousness throned amid his entrails, and we must listen. When blood is their argument, what answer is there left but a shriek of equal blood-pressure? The same enthusiast is quite capable of becoming a Communist on the following day and proclaiming, as I have so often heard, that logic is a middle-class fad and truth a bourgeois metaphysical conception. Again, there can be no reasoning with

## I COMMIT TO THE FLAMES

one who has thrown logic out of the window as the introduction to his politics. So there is no creed of the time, but only a caterwauling round the knees of the Dark Gods, to whom ascends a steam of sacrifice from the freshly killed meat of Edwardian reputations. Round the altar leap our little dervishes, sharpening their knives against any servant of sanity, logic, and proportion. To such acolytes of unreason reason is inaudible. That is the explanation of this book's illiberal title. For some kinds of rubbish the incinerator is the only remedy.

















